

## National Geographic Traveler Online October 2005

### Next Great City: Philly, Really

Text by Andrew Nelson

After decades of relative obscurity, Philadelphia, a classic American city, is ready to step back into the national limelight.

You don't usually don white tie and tails for a birthday party, but then, how often do you celebrate the birthday of a hotel? Yet, here we are—me, Walter Cronkite, and 1,854 other guests assembled to help blow out the candles for the hundredth anniversary of the opening of Philadelphia's Park Hyatt at the Bellevue, "the grand dame of Broad Street." As the crush in the lobby grows, I seek refuge from Philadelphia's elite on a spiral, marble staircase from which I can survey the scene. F. Scott Fitzgerald got it wrong, I think. There *are* second acts in American life—for hotels, certainly, and, yes, for entire cities.

When the (then) Bellevue-Stratford debuted in 1904, the elegant, 1,170-room French-Renaissance wedding cake embodied Philadelphia's status as one of America's premier metropolises. But as the decades passed, the Bellevue, and Philadelphia itself, lost their sheen. In 1976, Legionnaires' disease killed 29 of the Bellevue's guests, and the hotel closed for over a decade. That same year, Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* brought worldwide exposure to the City of Brotherly Love—but as a synonym for gritty urban decay. Indeed, residents were fleeing the city's core just as more vibrant urban areas were coming into their own.

My theory is that, like dogs, each city has its day. In the 1960s, people flocked to San Francisco; in the '70s, Dallas and Houston got hot; during the '80s, it was Miami, full of vice and sockless loafers; in the '90s, grungy Seattle became Nirvana. Now, in the new century, the Bellevue is back, and it's Philly's turn for the limelight.

"I've long thought of Philadelphia as the Next Great American City," says Tony Goldman, a real-estate developer who invests in nascent urban neighborhoods in Lower Manhattan, Miami Beach, and, more recently, here in Philly. "But it's just now being recognized and celebrated for it."

Moreover, says urban planner Richard Florida, who wrote *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Philadelphia is showing itself to be an "open city," a term that separates America's urban dynamos like San Francisco and Miami from struggling cities like Cleveland and St. Louis. "Open cities welcome people—singles, gays, artists and individuals," he says. "They have excitement and a sense of creative energy."

For years, I've been hearing great things about this city of 1.4 million on the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers. Newspaper articles speak of innovative development projects. Friends return from visits amazed that the nightlife is actually lively. "It's no longer D.C. on a bad hair day," as one jokes.

Philadelphia, I discover, comprises 152 distinct neighborhoods, ranging from working-class South Philly to yuppified Manayunk to ivied University City to up-and-coming Northern Liberties and Fishtown. But it is the Center City, the heart of downtown, that's energizing the rebirth. Trendy restaurants and condominiums abound. A soon-to-be-completed Cesar Pelli skyscraper, the Cira Centre, just across the Schuylkill River, forms a daring twist in the cityscape. The striking Kimmel Center, with its digital-age design, is the new home of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Philly, the only U.S. venue chosen for Live 8, last summer's multinational rock concert, is clearly on a roll. The city's official promoters have been aggressively marketing it to everyone from Canadians to gays to MTV execs. There's more to Philly, you'll hear, than Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. Like public art? Philly has some 2,400 murals. Razzle-dazzle? At the National Constitution Center museum, the nation's most hallowed document is celebrated with Vegas-style glitz. Street parties? Odunde, an annual Nigerian-inspired summer festival, attracts over 300,000 revelers. Enough visitors heed Philly's call that Southwest and Frontier airlines started service here last year, and the cruise terminal on the Delaware now offers 32 annual sailings.

A few months after the Bellevue bash, I step into the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts to see an 1822 self-portrait by Charles Willson Peale. The artist depicts himself raising a curtain, beckoning visitors into his Philadelphia museum. Inspired, I've enlisted modern Philadelphians to lift the curtain on their city for me.

I MEET KYLE FARLEY IN A coffee shop, appropriately enough, in the Bellevue's lobby. He looks more urban hipster than history scholar. Farley runs Poor Richard's Walking Tours, devoted to bringing Philly's past to life. I'm game.

Striding down Market Street, we pass the old Wanamaker's department store, now a Lord & Taylor's, where shoppers of the mid-20th century might have bought the Stetson hats, Philco TVs, and Flexible Flyer sleds made in local factories. Philly was called the "Workshop of the World," Farley says. But by the 1970s, the world had lost interest in products built here. One by one, many of Philly's factories closed. Neighborhoods collapsed. The city's population, which peaked in 1950 at 2.1 million, dropped to 1.4 million by 2003.

But, Farley explains as we traverse Washington Square, Philadelphia had a saving grace. "The grid laid out by founder William Penn in 1682, two miles long and one mile wide, is still here, making Center City the most walkable district of America's big cities. Everything you'd want is within a short distance." That convenience is drawing many businesses—particularly retailers—back.

Another gift from the past, Farley goes on, is Philadelphia's humongous stock of stately old buildings, mostly from the 19th century. To illustrate the point, he leads me into a popular clothing boutique occupying the former Van Rensselaer mansion, built in 1898 by a wealthy family. I wonder how they would react to having lingerie for sale in their living room.

"Recycling buildings is called adaptive reuse," Farley says, "and in Philadelphia there's a huge amount of it to reuse, not just gorgeous Victorian neighborhoods on tree-lined streets but also factories, breweries, old banks—these can be turned into all sorts of things."

The structures' quirks are part of their charm. Tony Goldman, who's redeveloping a Broad Street neighborhood he calls B3, tells me later: "Grit is good. Fabulous, funky, ugly, or crazy—grit provides color and makes life exciting."

I'M HANGING WITH CHEF Martin Hamann of the Four Seasons Fountain restaurant. We're strolling Reading Terminal Market—open since 1892 and housed beneath the terminus of a railroad made famous by the Monopoly game. The market, which wilted like week-old lettuce back in the 1970s, has made a remarkable rebound. The train shed above has morphed into the grand hall of Philadelphia's enormous convention center. The market below is now a gourmet free-for-all filled with hubbubbing shoppers and stalls bulging with everything from caviar to Amish donuts. "Now, great food is available here on a daily basis again," Hamann says.

"Move it, big guy," a vendor wheeling crates of oranges yells at me good-naturedly. I jump back. The bustle around here is exhilarating.

So is Center City's delightful variety of dinner restaurants, whose numbers have more than tripled since 1992, to 201, many of them occupying recycled buildings. Restaurateur Stephen Starr's 12 Philly eateries, for example, with names like Striped Bass, Tangerine, and Buddakan, inhabit such structures as a former ad agency and a bank.

Lifelong residents can't believe their luck. "When I grew up, there were three kinds of restaurants in Philadelphia—steak, steak, and fish," gallery owner Rick Snyderman told me earlier. "Now the city's wide open when it comes to food."

When chef Hamann and I return from the market, he serves me his reinvention of the Philly cheesesteak. He's reimagined the local icon as a spring roll, with the standard chopped steak and American cheese wrapped like a Chinese treat instead of stuffed into a sandwich. As Philadelphians know, you eat your cheesesteaks—even this newfangled variety—leaning over, so nothing falls onto your shoes. It isn't decorous. But it is delicious. I have two.

The renaissance of Philadelphia restaurants goes hand in hand with the revitalization of its neighborhoods, John Mariani tells me later. "Restaurants throw light on streets," says the *Esquire* food critic and co-author of the *Italian-American Cookbook*. "Sometimes a single restaurant can revitalize a whole section." Enterprising restaurateurs like Susanna Foo and her Walnut Street eatery, Georges Perrier and his *Le Bec-Fin* and, of course, Stephen Starr, are bringing the City Center—and Philly cuisine—back to eminence. "It's back, big time," Mariani says.

ON THE FIRST FRIDAY of every month, the art galleries of the Old City—a dense cluster of 19th-century buildings near the Delaware River—throw open their doors to all comers. This has created an effervescent social scene, helping to jumpstart the revival of the Old City. Now, arguably, it's the liveliest urban neighborhood between SoHo in New York and SoBe in Miami. The area, with its 84 colleges, has more students—some 290,000—than Boston, making Philadelphia a bona fide playground for the young.

My guide tonight is Brandon Joyce, the 27-year-old self-described "mayor" of the South Philadelphia Athenaeum, a group of 30 twentysomethings working and playing in a 13,000-square-foot warehouse. "We're the real 'Real World,'" he says of the group thriving on Philadelphia's cheap digs and creative juices.

We join the streams of gallery-hoppers on the sidewalks. Unlike New York's, the Philly art scene is less air-kiss glamour and more come-as-you-are open house. Kids piggyback on fathers' backs, grandmothers converse with tattooed sculptors, and the galleries' old floorboards groan beneath the crush of people.

Joyce is eager to find a concert he's heard about, and we head into nearby Chinatown to find it. As we wander the back streets, where posters advertise \$12 bus rides to Manhattan, Joyce talks about Philly's allure.

"I love the excitement in the air here—and the smell," says the philosophy grad. "There's a palpable smell from peoples' collective moods."

I'll grant him that, though I smell only egg rolls and beer. Then, suddenly, we're at the concert—and within eyeshot of City Hall, bathed in white light. Atop its crown is William Penn, all 27 bronze tons of him, peering out above the knot of young people. We enter and climb four flights to the performance space. The warm-up act is local painter Shawn Thornton and his homemade electric zither bass. Thornton is a proponent of Noise, a new rock genre that sounds like plain racket to me, though my Gen-X host can't get enough. I escape into an adjoining gallery and glance out the window once more at Philadelphia's founding father. From this angle, Penn looks bemused, like a host whose party didn't quite turn out as planned but is fun nonetheless.

WITH HER TOUSLED BLOND hair and cat-eye glasses, and dressed in stripes, paisleys, and polka dots, Elizabeth Fiend looks like she hatched from a church basement rummage sale. This punk rock version of Martha Stewart hosts "BiG TeA PaRtY," a public television show charting Philly's sprawling street life and politics (and offering cooking tips). I join Fiend to tour South Philadelphia, the city's famed working-class Italian neighborhood. We navigate our way to the Italian Market, redolent of fish, woodsmoke, and anise.

"There's only one way to do things around here," Fiend says of her neighborhood. "Their way. That's the Philly 'addytude'—a type of honesty with a tough-guy edge."

I get a helping of Philly addytude while ordering a hoagie at Chickie's Italian Deli. Though it's only 3 p.m., and the place is packed with patrons, Chickie's will close in an hour. "It's not about maximizing profit," whispers Fiend. "They don't like working nights. They close each day at 4, or when the bread runs out, whichever comes first. But the food's so good, you work around that."

"Small?" barks the counterman.

"Okay," I gulp, "roast pork and...." I see a choice of cheese on the menu. "Make that sharp provolone." Fiend telegraphs approval.

"That all?"

I pause. Fiend hisses: "Ask for the broccoli rabe," a fancy relative of turnip greens.

"...and some broccoli rabe."

The man's face brightens.

"Well, awlright," he says.

"I thought broccoli rabe was yuppie," I say to Fiend, as we walk our carryout to her house.

"No way," she says. "The yuppies stole it from South Philly."

Fiend and her husband, Allen, live on a block of sturdy brick row houses. The plastic awnings, clean stoops, and front window religious displays epitomize the neighborhood character. Italian. Immutable. Unchangeable.

"But change is happening here," Fiend says, as we tuck into lunch in her green and lavender kitchen. "The kids who grew up in South Philly are moving out to suburbia to find their dreams. When the old people go, Vietnamese, Mexicans, and hipsters take their place."

Add Buddhist Cambodians, Catholic Lebanese, and Muslim Algerians. Recent immigrants are seeding the crowded streets with diverse languages and new restaurants. They're also, inevitably, diluting the old Philly addytude.

No matter. South Philly still takes care of its own. When a Cambodian temple caught fire in 2003, the men who rescued the Buddhist monks were their neighbors from two doors down, which happened to be a group of Mummers, Philadelphia's famous costumed clubbers that parade every New Year's Day. "We really cared about those monks," the Mummer's Museum executive director told the Philadelphia Daily News. "We have a history with that temple."

HOW DO YOU KNIT TOGETHER a rapidly diversifying city? Driving along the Benjamin Franklin Parkway—Philadelphia's version of the Champs Élysée—I hear city information officer Dianah Neff's answer: "Use invisible thread."

Neff's mission is to turn Philadelphia into one giant WiFi hot spot. That's geekspeak for putting "wireless fidelity" transmitters on light poles to beam an Internet signal into citizens' desktop computers, laptops, cell phones, or PDAs. Subscribers will pay a small fee, waived in some cases, and will get screaming fast Internet service that's almost as available as broadcast television signals.

Visitors will be able to Google train schedules in Love Park, find a shoe sale while strolling Market Street, read a biography of Ben Franklin on their way to tour Independence Hall, or pay a parking ticket without ever standing in line. It's one of the more ambitious wireless plans on Earth. "How soon will it be up and running?" I ask. "End of the decade?"

"Oh, goodness no," Neff says. "By next year."

She smiles. She knows she impressed me. We tour several pilot areas where the city has already affixed wireless transmitters. Cable and telephone companies have objected to the plan, for obvious reasons. But, Neff argues, those companies don't have a financial incentive to blanket the entire city, especially the poorer areas of North and West Philadelphia. Going completely WiFi, she continues, will be as advantageous to Philly in the information age as the Delaware River or the Pennsylvania Railroad were in the industrial age.

"The city's future depends on us being digital," Neff says, as we drive to the Powelton neighborhood, site of a program training low-income mothers to telecommute, doing data-processing via wireless connection. It's another good idea from a city that seems to have a fair share of them.

ONE OF PHILADELPHIA'S GREATEST assets is of a low-tech variety—its sidewalks. A city needs shoulders rubbing together to produce the friction that makes things happen. Philadelphia's density and sheer walkability insure that people will keep mixing it up—and all that debating, flirting, and bargaining generates ideas. Maybe that's why they wrote the Declaration of Independence here. The city was once, and is again, a place for creative solutions and big pictures.

Kyle Farley and I ended our walking tour in Rittenhouse Square, one of the five original parks that Penn laid out. Sunday shoppers stream into the tree-shaded square from all four corners. "Jane Jacobs, the urban theorist who wrote *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, loved this place," Farley tells me. "She said it's like a ballet, with people dancing across the stage."

Dancing, I thought—that's right. Philadelphia is like a stage, no matter whether the

performance of the moment is a waltz, rock, or salsa. Keep the red curtain raised, Mr. Peale. This city is ready for its second act.

Contributing editor Andrew Nelson, a connoisseur of American cities, wrote about Charleston in the September issue and Los Angeles in July/August. This is freelance photographer Raymond Patrick's first feature assignment for Traveler.