

The Kimmel Center

Design Following Function & the Identity of a District

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I. Introduction

Today, Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts is an urban hotspot for arts, culture and nightlife. It stretches along South Broad Street between Washington Ave on the south and Glenwood Ave on the north.¹ But for most of the 20th century, the area was considerably less developed. In a 1994 issue of *The Economist*, one reporter characterized it by saying, "Philadelphia's citizens seek safety behind locked doors or flee to the suburbs, and the streets in the city's centre are left empty, bleak and dangerous."² In the final decade of the 20th century, the area underwent a transformation, largely through the efforts of Mayor Edward Rendell and his Avenue of the Arts Initiative. The state, the city, and a number of rich donors invested \$330 million to revitalize Broad Street.³ At the forefront of this project was the construction of the \$235 million Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts. While only one building, The Kimmel Center has defined Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts.

Opened to the public on December 14, 2001, the Kimmel Center occupies a block at the corner of Spruce and South Broad (Fig. 1). Designed by architect Rafael Vinoly, the center is a large rectangle of 450,000 square feet. It houses two central performance venues: the 2,547 seat Verizon Hall and the smaller 651 seat Perelman Theater. Each is treated as its own freestanding building. Verizon Hall is centered at the far end of the center from Broad, while Perelman Theater sits off-axis toward the front. In the center is an enormous lobby, and the Dorrance H. Hamilton Roof Garden sits on top of Perelman Theater. The entire area is enclosed by a 150-foot glass vault that runs the length of the building and ends on either side in an enormous arch. Altogether, construction cost \$235 million and used 2,000 workers.⁴ This massive structure embodies the intersection of function and design. To understand its full significance, one must begin by looking at its historical role.

II. A Historical Perspective

Beginning in 1993, the Avenue of the Arts Initiative revitalized the economy of South Broad Street. This effort was led by a non-profit called Avenue of the Arts, Inc. (AAI), from which the area derived its name. In their own words, AAI was created, "to coordinate and

¹ Avenue of the Arts, *Facts About the Avenue*, http://www.avenueofthearts.org/about_facts.asp (Dec. 01, 2013).

² Arts for jobs. (1994, Apr 09). *The Economist*, 331, 93. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/224156741?accountid=14707>.

³ *The Economist*, Apr. 09, 1994.

⁴ Kimmel Center for the performing arts, *Building Facts*, <http://kimmelcenter.org/building/facts.php> (Dec. 01, 2013).

oversee the growth and development of the Avenue of the Arts.”⁵ Backing up a few years, the scene in Philadelphia was distressing. As late as 1991, the city faced a \$230 million deficit. It was even called, “the city that sets the standard for municipal distress in the '90s.”⁶ But from its inception, AAI took an active economic role in revitalizing the area. It financed the refurbishment of several local venues, including the Clef Club and Freedom Theatre; and it enhanced the local streetscape. Simultaneously, the city devoted \$10 million to infrastructure development. A 1997 issue of *Nation's Cities Weekly* summarized the Avenue's growth:

It means safer streets, higher property values, more jobs, more companies staying and moving to the city, an increased tax base . . . a better bottom line. Avenue of the Arts is the cornerstone of the city's economic revitalization, fostering regeneration and renewal not only along North and South Broad Street, but within surrounding neighborhoods, making Philadelphia a safer, healthier, and more inviting city for businesses and residents alike.⁷

By 1998, four hotels were under construction and restaurant business was on the rise. High-end office rental prices increased from \$18 to \$20. By 2005, \$1.1 billion in private investment had been leveraged.⁸ AAI wasn't just investing in music, but in long-term economic, political and social development. From a historical perspective, AAI gave new life to Philadelphia.

Just as the area's growth hinged on the arts, the success of AAI hinged on the Kimmel Center. It was believed that without the central performance space, the Avenue could not reach a critical mass of support. Theory held that Philadelphia needed a condensed center of arts venues and supporting franchises like restaurants and hotels. The AAI vision was for a safe, supportive, diverse, and loyal community.⁹ Thus when the Kimmel Center opened in 2001, AAI's Jessica Whaley marked it as “the crown jewel and a turning point.”¹⁰ Other contemporary journalists called it the “centerpiece”¹¹ and a “landmark.”¹² Ultimately, the economic history of Broad Street at the end of the 20th century hinged upon the success of the new artistic drive. This artistic drive was in turn focused to a point at the Kimmel Center. To discuss the successes of AAI without the central center would be to ignore its monumental role.

III. A Cultural Perspective

⁵ http://www.avenueofthearts.org/about_facts.asp

⁶ Douglas Herbert, "Philadelphia regains faith in itself," *Christian Science Monitor* 02 Dec. 1997: 4. *EBSCO MegaFILE*. Web. 1 Dec. 2013.

⁷ G.A. Pfeiffer, "Avenue of the Arts: Philadelphia's center stage," *Nation's Cities Weekly* 13 Oct. 1997: 3. *Global Reference on the Environment, Energy, and Natural Resources*. Web. 24 Nov. 2013.

⁸ Kevin Riordan, "Making Room For The Arts," *Planning* 71.3 (2005): 10-11. *EBSCO MegaFILE*. Web. 1 Dec. 2013.

⁹ *Nation's Cities Weekly*, Oct. 13, 1997.

¹⁰ *Planning*, 71.3(2005).

¹¹ James Olearchik, "The Philadelphia Story," *Travel Agent* 306.3 (2001): 140. *EBSCO MegaFILE*. Web. 1 Dec. 2013.

¹² Shirley Fleming, "Philadelphia's Kimmel Center," *American Record Guide* 65.2 (2002): 5. *EBSCO MegaFILE*. Web. 1 Dec. 2013.

In addition to its economic role, the Kimmel Center helped the Avenue of the Arts create a new identity. The first part of this identity was the obvious artistic. Of course AAI's investment in the arts brought an artistic energy to the area. But the Kimmel Center itself came to embody that energy. It housed six performance companies, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Philly Pops, American Theater Arts for Youth, and PHILADANCO.¹³ This centralization and concentration of groups simultaneously gave Philadelphia arts legitimacy and also attracted large numbers of patrons. Furthermore, this artistic identity was at the center of the design for both performance venues in the center.

Verizon Hall was born out of the Philadelphia Orchestra's long-existing desire for a new performance space. Architectural Record magazine wrote of its opening: "The whole reason everyone was there was because the Philadelphia Orchestra had carried on so long about the need for an acoustically reverberant space."¹⁴ Thus the design for Verizon Hall revolved entirely around acoustics and sound quality. To achieve that goal, Vinoly and head acoustician Russell Johnson utilized the cutting edge in acoustic technology as well as architectural design. Vinoly designed the space into the shape of a cello rather than the traditional rectangular box (Fig. 2). Johnson described it as, "a shoebox with Britney Spears curves."¹⁵ This shape was supposed to increase the aesthetic enjoyment of performance while simultaneously enhancing sound quality. It contains hardwood paneling and a fully adjustable array of acoustical tools that include a 30-ton computer-controlled acoustical canopy and 100 computerized chamber doors.¹⁶ Other acoustical innovations include a pocket of air beneath the stage and a layer of rubber padding beneath the entire structure to absorb vibrations. Together, these elements increase resonance and allow for minute adjustments.

Similarly, Perelman Theater was designed as a versatile drama space. Ann Miller, then president of the Regional Performing Arts Center (the organization that governs the Kimmel Center), described it as, "a gift to the theater community."¹⁷ She noted that, "Perelman was designed for chamber orchestra, repertory theater and experimental theater." Such a diverse set of uses required a unique design for the hall. The 27,000 square foot theater is housed in an 87-foot cube (Fig. 3).¹⁸ Inside, the stage is designed for instant convertibility and can accommodate

¹³ Kimmel Center for the performing arts, *Resident Companies*, <http://kimmelcenter.org/resident/> (Dec. 01, 2013).

¹⁴ Suzanne Stephens, "Rafael Viñoly's Arresting And Controversial Design For The New KIMMEL CENTER Offers The Philadelphia Orchestra A Concert Hall Under Glass," *Architectural Record* 190.3 (2002): 106. *EBSCO MegaFILE*. Web. 1 Dec. 2013.

¹⁵ *American Record Guide* 65.2 (2002).

¹⁶ Elizabeth Bennett, "Home On The Verizon," *Stage Directions* 15.3 (2002): 20. *EBSCO MegaFILE*. Web. 1 Dec. 2013.

¹⁷ *Stage Directions* 15.3 (2002).

¹⁸ Kimmel Center for performing arts, *Project Description & Specifications*, <http://kimmelcenter.org/building/description.php> (Dec. 01, 2013).

almost any seating arrangement. In conjunction with head theater consultant Richard Pilbrow, Vinoly designed the stage to revolve with the push of a button (Fig. 4). Additionally, seating in front of the stage can be lowered using an elevator, allowing for extra stage space or function space.¹⁹ Again, function dictated design, and the need for an adjustable and multi-purpose hall resulted in a unique piece of performance architecture.

More subtly, the Kimmel Center also embodied Philadelphia's drive for a more accessible identity. Journalist Suzanne Stephens reported on the center's opening, making several important insights. She characterized Philadelphia's historical character as "stuffy," which she attributed to the city's "legacy of Quakerism, Sunday blue laws, and suburban Main Line."²⁰ A mid 20th century sociological report by Digby Baltzell noted how men in suits and women in fur would walk from Rittenhouse to the Philadelphia Orchestra to hear the famous Philadelphia Sound. But the Kimmel Center's opening night swung far to the opposite end. It began with a performance by Pop artist Elton John, complete with lights, TV screens and a lot of pizzazz. This choice of opening act marked a pointed move towards a less stuffy reputation. Additionally, the opening marked the hope for a diverse set of performances in the center. The next night, formality returned with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Stephens remarked, "A concert hall that can handle this combination has to be sufficiently stuffy (meaning grand), but still pop (lively)."²¹ The new character of mixed arts reflected a general effort to create a new self-definition.

Lastly, the Kimmel Center provided a space for people to gather, adding casual socialization to its identity. Vinoly himself identified this goal when he said; "You can't avoid seeing the Kimmel Center as a place where you're together with many other people. You see them; there are no barriers. All the traditional areas of the lobby are merged into this new civic space."²² This intention was reflected in the theme of openness throughout the center. To begin with, the entire structure is a transparent glass curtain (Fig. 5). Walter Cichonski of L F Driscoll Co., Bala Cynwyd, Pa wrote that the type of wall "has never been done before."²³ It is a construction of individual 174-ft diameter glass slabs that are suspended by vertical cables and a cast-iron weight system. Through the use of glass, Vinoly accomplished full transparency, and thus succeeded in creating an open and weatherproof meeting space. In addition to its two performance spaces, the center houses the Dorrance H. Hamilton Roof Garden (Fig. 6), a rooftop

¹⁹ *Stage Directions* 15.3 (2002).

²⁰ *Architectural Record* 190.3 (2002).

²¹ *Architectural Record* 190.3 (2002).

²² Kimmel Center for the performing arts, *An Interview with Rafael Vinoly*, <http://www.kimmelcenter.org/building/rvqa.php> (Dec. 01, 2013).

²³ Nadine M. Post, "Raising The Glass Curtain (Cover Story)," *ENR: Engineering News-Record* 247.22 (2001): 26. EBSCO MegaFILE. Web. 1 Dec. 2013.

garden that frequently hosts gatherings and events. Additionally, the center houses a number of smaller performance spaces and meeting rooms.²⁴ Walking around and each level and along the recessed balconies reveals numerous meeting rooms and function spaces, such as the Merck Arts Education Center and the Rendell Room. Both spaces are designed for interactive arts education.²⁵ Most important, though, is the Commonwealth Plaza (Fig. 7). This open space joins the two theaters and functions as one of the main gathering areas.²⁶ Today the plaza contains bars, cafes, and restaurants to stimulate socialization at all times of day and encourage interaction. Between the spacious design, the internal garden, and the array of performance and meeting spaces, the Kimmel Center has become the perfect space for community arts.

IV. Conclusion

Even without any knowledge of the history of the Avenue of the Arts, merely walking down Broad Street proves that the Kimmel Center dominates the area. As the north-south axis of the Philadelphia grid, Broad Street connects with Market Street at City Hall. Along Broad, City Hall tower dominates the skyline. But at street level, the Kimmel Center's glass-vaulted ceiling stands out most from the surrounding buildings (Fig. 8). Visually, the glass refracts sunlight to attract the eye. Its reflective surface is much more alluring than surrounding brick and stone materials. Additionally, its architectural design is completely unique on the street. Its curvature sharply contrasts against the block-like buildings in view. Thus as one approaches Philadelphia's center at City Hall, the Kimmel center actually stands out almost as much as the tower itself. Within its urban context, even more so than as a standalone building, the center is an important architectural achievement.

The modern Avenue of the Arts thrives, towering over its historical reputation. It supports 6,000 jobs. Annually it generates \$10 million in tax revenues; \$193 million in direct expenditures; and an additional \$84.2 million from arts patrons for transportation, food, lodging, and the like.²⁷ The Kimmel Center today houses six arts companies, runs more than four educational programs, puts on the world's premier shows, and frequently hosts special events. The center's history marks the significant role of architecture in everyday life. Its embodiment of abstract social ideals and its active role in the urban economy have demonstrated the central role of architecture in everyday life. As the intersection of civic engagement, artistic prowess, economic vitality, and functional design it stands as inspiration for other urban areas.

²⁴ <http://kimmelcenter.org/building/description.php>

²⁵ Kimmel Center for the performing arts, *Fact Sheets*, <http://www.kimmelcenter.org/news/fact-sheets.php> (Dec. 01, 2013).

²⁶ *Stage Directions* 15.3 (2002).

²⁷ Avenue of the Arts, *Economic & Social Impact*, http://www.avenueofthearts.org/about_economic_social_impact.asp (Dec. 01, 2013).

Illustrations

FIG. 1

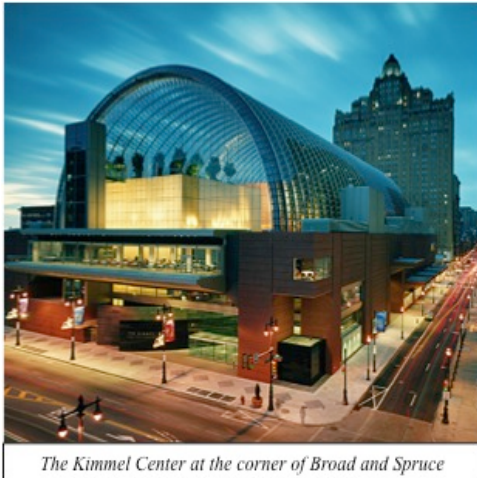


FIG. 2



FIG. 3

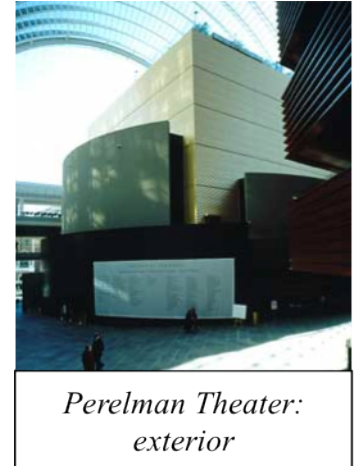


FIG. 4

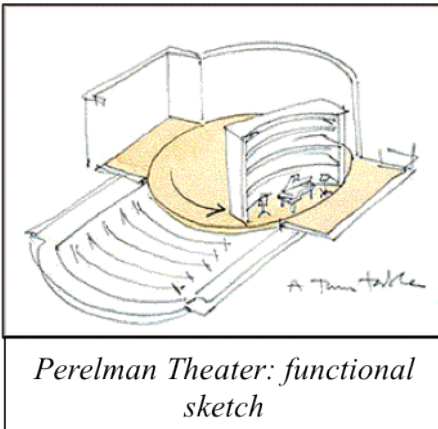


FIG. 5



FIG. 6



FIG. 7



FIG. 8



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Image Sources

Fig. 1 "The Kimmel Center at the corner of Broad and Spruce":
<http://www.kimmel.org/Highlights45.html>

Fig. 2 "Verizon Hall Seating Chart": <http://www.philorch.org/seating-map>

Fig. 3 "Perelman Theater Exterior":
<http://www.kimmelcenter.org/building/gallery.php?gallery=4>

Fig. 4 "Perelman Theater Functional Sketch":
http://canso.harmonylogic.com/architects/vinoly/vinoly_kimmel/vinoly_kimmel_index.html

Fig. 5 "Kimmel Center's Glass Vault":
<http://www.kimmelcenter.org/building/gallery.php?gallery=1&showimage=10>

Fig. 6 "Dorrance H. Hamilton Roof harden": <http://www.kimmelcenter.org/facilities/rentals-weddings.php>

Fig. 7 "Commonwealth Plaza": <http://kimmelcenter.org/building/gallery.php?gallery=2>

Fig. 8 "Street View of Broad Street":
<https://www.google.com/maps/preview#!q=kimmel+center&data=!1m8!1m3!1d3!2d-75.165167!3d39.947024!2m2!1f187.26!2f90!4f75!2m7!1e1!2m2!1s8k1UoE-Cqh1KMxVYphp7Hg!2e0!5m2!1s8k1UoE-Cqh1KMxVYphp7Hg!2e0!4m15!2m14!1m13!1s0x89c6c624dedad2fb%3A0xb467e4551590c7e9!3m8!1m3!1d48782!2d-75.196572!3d39.9894269!3m2!1i1440!2i766!4f13.1!4m2!3d39.946671!4d-75.165226&fid=5>