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## CITYSPACE

### The Philadelphian



**ONE-STOP TOURING:** Philadelphia could learn a lot from the Smithsonian Institution, which has many museums under one umbrella. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

## Philly's museums should take a cue from Washington, D.C., and unite.

by Bruce Andersen

Buildings and monuments are a reflection of a people and their culture. Much of our lives are spent learning about, enjoying or observing the tributes that people have built to themselves. London evokes the image of Big Ben. Mention Rome, and we see the Coliseum. Speak of Paris, and it's the Eiffel Tower. But what would these great buildings be without people and institutions to keep them alive?

Anyone who has spent time in Philly has seen the many museums and cultural institutions — a living testament to the people of Philadelphia — scattered throughout the city. Most were founded at a time when people valued arts and culture, perhaps more so than they do today. Created to fill a void, those institutions are now are fragmented and disjointed. As Philadelphians, we need to focus on the state of our local arts and culture groups because the status quo is alarming.

In Philadelphia, museums are continually struggling to raise the money needed to stay open. The Civil War and Underground Railroad Museum almost left Philadelphia. To help them stay, the William Penn Foundation made a \$341,000 grant. The African American Museum and the Atwater Kent have both been in financial trouble as well.

Part of the financial problem is the diverse nature of these institutions. Each organization has a different charter, mandate and constituency. They all exist to serve the public, yet they compete for visitors and funding. This competition, and the fact that each organization is forced to exist on its own, is unhealthy for the individual institutions and bad for the people of Philadelphia.

James Smithson, the man who endowed the Smithsonian Institution, once said, "Every man is a valuable member of society who, by his observations, researches and experiments, procures knowledge for men." In that vein, the people of Philadelphia should create an institution that brings together all the arts, culture, religion, science and history institutions within the city under one umbrella — The Philadelphian.

The Philadelphian, like the Smithsonian, could bind together all the disparate arts and culture groups within the city. Focusing on the arts and culture helps Philadelphia position itself as a progressive, forward-thinking city. But the idea makes sense whether you look at geography, finances or marketing.

**Geography:** The Smithsonian is a collection of museums located in close proximity on the National Mall in Washington, D.C; Philadelphia's museums are not as close together as the Smithsonian buildings, but because most are in or are close to Center City, it would be easy to coordinate travel between them.

**Finance:** In 1998, the Pennsylvania Economy League estimated that local arts and cultural institutions were a \$300 million industry, employing 11,000 people and generating more than \$6 million in revenue for the city. Money invested in the arts pays a direct dividend. Yet the state of our museums is alarming, especially this year, as the city slashed arts funding. Working as one institution would ease some of the operating costs because there would be less overhead. The stronger museums could also help the weaker museums financially.

**Marketing:** Many visitors to Washington plan extended stays to have time to visit all the historic sites and the museums. It is not uncommon for people to spend an entire day at just one museum. The same could be true for Philadelphia.

There are a lot of people who come to the Rocky steps but never make it inside the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Wouldn't it serve the city better if more people planned their visits to see all the museums? Use the museums to promote each other and to encourage people to do just that.

Funding this idea is the biggest challenge — and is also the answer. Each of the existing museums has its own mandate, and bringing them together would be difficult. However, guaranteeing a steady source of revenue would




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ions. Why not increase the local sales tax by a small percentage and  
tax burden could be offset by giving residents free access to the

by great benefits. Museum administrators, foundation officials, elected  
officials, the legislature and the judiciary would all need to cooperate. With the state of the schools and the budget  
problems the city faces, this may not seem like a high priority, but the money, prestige and educational benefits that  
the arts bring to Philadelphia are factors we can't ignore. The buildings, and the institutions that house them, tell the  
world who we are. Support the arts — build The Philadelphian.

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