



New Media

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We need our own new media hang out

by Ric Kolenda

I love Philadelphia. I began with this because I don't think we say it (or hear it) enough. Philly is unusual among large cities because it's a city of neighborhoods; a big city with a small-town feel. When I moved here for graduate school 15 years ago --- I grew up in a suburb of Grand Rapids, Mich. --- I sensed even then that I found a new home. Of course I came here with the very specific purpose of studying cities, and I chose to do so here because of the city's qualities. But the qualities I value so highly as a transplanted Philadelphian also present us with unique challenges.

One of the biggest challenges we face being in the shadow of New York City. I certainly it's a legitimate advantage for Philadelphia that we are close to New York and Washington, but we too often see ourselves as "NYC-lite" or worse. We do have many distinct advantages over our sister city to the northeast and we should claim them proudly.

An issue faced by our particular working community is the decentralization that gives the various sections of the region their own distinct qualities. In my work with the Philadelphia Area New Media Association over the last three years, I have been trying to identify the "center" of new media in the region. Certainly, for the first two years we were an unabashed urban group whose companies tended to be concentrated in Old City and Manayunk. But very quickly it became apparent that there were pockets of activity all over the region. We were constantly finding out that other companies were doing cool things, often on a national or international scale, in South Philadelphia, Wilmington, Cherry Hill, Bensalem, and other unsuspecting locations. And no more discussion of the geography of new media can be complete without mentioning our region's primary high-tech corridor along Route 202.

This diffusion has made it difficult to create a geographical identity for the industry. OK, we know that Silicon Alley in Manhattan was largely a fabrication of someone who put eight or ten dots on a map and declared it a trend. But soon a building at 55 Broad Street became the symbol of Silicon Alley and the actual home of many of its premier companies as well as the New York New Media Association. The Alley then became what it was touted to be. SO maybe we in Philadelphia are just guilty of being too inclusive or too accurate in our representation of new media in our area. Or maybe we need a symbol around which to rally.

I believe we are at a critical point in our regional identity. There are beginning to be several incubators and buildings vying for the title of "New Media Center" and more are emerging. Among these are locations University City (the University City Science Center and Ben Franklin Technology Center), North Broad Street (401 N. Broad and 12th and Callowhill Sts.) and two new incubators: one in Narberth (The Innovation Factory) and a joint venture by Safeguard Scientifics and KimmelCorp.com in Bryn Mawr. And I'm sure there are more about which I'm not aware.

Here are my thoughts about what is required of such a building:

It should be new media-focused. That means it's not an information technology or biotechnology building. Yes we use technology, but ultimately we're in the new media business with all the things that accompany it.

It should be wired to the hilt. Big fat pipes with all the bells and whistles should be available to the area's hottest new and established companies.

It should be geographically central to other companies. I think we're past the point of trying to create a place to develop from scratch. In my opinion, the only thing close to such an area is Old City in Philadelphia.

It should have life after dark, which Old City certainly does. Ideally the kind of young, talented, creative people we wish to attract and keep here will be able to live and be entertained near their workplace. Also, we work notoriously long and odd hours, which means coming and going from work at all times of the night and day, so it should be relatively safe and lively after 5 p.m. It should be more than just a business hub, but also a community center that would include entertainment and meeting facilities and a training facility.

I would love to hear your opinions about this issue. Do you agree that we need some kind of geographical anchor? And if so, what would you like to see, and where would you like to see it? Send me e-mail or fill out the survey on my Web site at <http://www.kolenda.com/nmcenter>. I'm particularly interested in hearing from people who are involved in such projects already or who might be in the future, either as tenant or landlord.

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