

# HISTORY OF THE AVENUE OF THE ARTS

The Avenue of the Arts originated as a vision for Philadelphia’s civic, cultural, and business leaders to create an arts and entertainment district that would act as a catalyst for cultural and economic growth on Broad Street, Philadelphia’s “Main Street. ”

Long considered Philadelphia’s main thoroughfare, Broad Street—and much of Center City—had steadily declined by the early 1990s, when then-Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell envisioned an “Avenue of the Arts” along Broad Street. He saw it as part of a larger strategy to revitalize the city, using the area’s arts and cultural strengths as a driver of economic growth.

Let’s take a brief look at the Avenue’s first three decades as we move into its fourth:

## **FIRST DECADE (1993–2002)**

Building on Ed Rendell’s vision, Avenue of the Arts, Inc. (AAI) was established under the leadership of Dr. Bernard Watson, AAI’s first Board Chair, and Ellen Solms, Executive Director. The initial focus was on planning and funding the rebirth of the Avenue as Philadelphia’s Main Street, a hub for arts, culture, and entertainment for both the city and the region; equally important was its role as a catalyst for economic development along the Avenue and in Center City. This focus, combined with the energy and expertise of AAI’s first Board of Directors, helped drive the addition of significant arts and cultural venues on the Avenue between Glenwood and Washington Avenues, alongside the internationally renowned Academy of Music. Among these new venues (which continue to thrive today) were the Arts Bank, the Brandywine Workshop, the Clef Club, and the Freedom Theater. The highlight of this effort was the development and grand opening of the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, which received applause from around the world.

As Mayor Rendell had envisioned, these developments encouraged the private sector, with government support, to invest in further projects along the Avenue. This included the expansion of the Doubletree Hotel, the transformation of the shuttered Girard Bank building into the luxurious Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and the conversion of the former Ridgeway Library into the High School for the Creative and Performing Arts. Additionally, it involved the change of the City Hall Annex into a much-needed hotel to serve the newly developed Convention Center, the creation of the Prince Theater, and PAFA’s addition of the historic Hamilton Building to its renowned campus.

## **SECOND DECADE (2003–2012)**

With the completion of the Kimmel Center, AAI’s Board felt it was appropriate to focus on the stewardship and enhancement of the Avenue and its new assets. Under the leadership of the new Board Chair, then Philadelphia and Pennsylvania’s First Lady, now United States Court of Appeals Judge Marjorie O. (Midge) Rendell, and newly appointed Executive Director Karen Lewis, AAI worked to facilitate discussions and planning for further economic and cultural development. According to Judge Rendell, “While the Kimmel Center has injected new vitality and excitement into South Broad Street, the Avenue of the Arts is not yet a finished product. From Pine Street to Washington Avenue, the abundance of available sites presents unique opportunities for investors in a variety of entertainment, cultural, residential, and commercial uses.” Not surprisingly, Judge Rendell’s insights into the development opportunities have been foundational to the ongoing transformation of the Avenue.

AAI aimed to establish and enhance the cultural and economic foundation for the Avenue that was developed during the first decade. An Avenue Council was formed to bring together business and cultural leaders to discuss shared issues and objectives, as well as to coordinate efforts that promote the interests of stakeholders along the Avenue. AAI sought to elevate the profile of both the Avenue itself and the expanding business and residential community between Thirteenth and Fifteenth Streets. Judge Rendell stepped down as Board Chair in 2007 and was succeeded in 2008 by Jorge Lovera and David Blum, serving as co-Chairs, followed by Patricia (Trish) Wellenbach from 2009 to 2011.

AAI also continued its focus on enhancing assets along the Avenue. Under the leadership of Board Member and recognized architect/planner Jorge Lovera, AAI planned and completed an iconic street lighting project on North Broad Street, securing more than \$10 million in state (RCAP) funding. This project introduced significant lighting and streetscape improvements for North Broad Street. Perhaps more importantly, it visibly demonstrated AAI's ability to facilitate the enhancement of the physical elements of the Avenue, providing another example of AAI's leadership in planning for the important streetscape and infrastructure projects to be initiated by AAI soon.

### **THIRD DECADE (2013–2022)**

As AAI entered its third decade, it became clear that building upon the successes of the Avenue required the development and maintenance of working relationships, as well as a continuous dialogue with, and support from, key stakeholders across both the public and private sectors. The AAI Board, together with City officials, faced the challenging decision to focus AAI's efforts on the south side of the Avenue. A separate organization was established to address the needs of stakeholders north of City Hall. AAI looked to Dianne Semingson, serving as Board Chair, and Paul Beideman, as Executive Director- both accomplished leaders in the city's business and civic arenas, known for their credibility in the Philadelphia, governmental, non-profit, and business sectors- to guide the next phase of its work.

Under the leadership of Semingson and Beideman, AAI revitalized the Avenue Council to create a forum for stakeholders to voice concerns about life on the Avenue and to enhance our community as we emerged from the pandemic. Simultaneously, the AAI Board recognized that the next crucial step in realizing the original vision was to establish a clear identity for the Avenue as the place for residents, workers, students, and visitors to engage in the City's life. New LED lighting, vibrant planters, festive holiday decorations, and inviting crosswalks were implemented. The Board believed that the Avenue could and should be one of the great streets of the world, a destination for both citizens and visitors. They acknowledged that the "Placemaking" of the Avenue as Philadelphia's "Main Street" would help fulfill Ed Rendell's vision of a sustainable future, particularly considering the Avenue's unique cultural and economic advantages. Following the retirement of Executive Director Paul Beideman in 2021, AAI appointed Laura Burkhardt as Executive Director to assist the AAI Board in implementing the new vision.

### **FOURTH DECADE (2023...)**

The years 2023 and 2024 emphasized street stewardship, strengthened the arts assets post-Covid, and prepared for the next chapter. A change in board leadership occurred at the start of 2025, with Dianne Semingson assuming the role of Emeritus Chair after more than ten years of unwavering dedication to the Avenue of the Arts' mission as board chair. Madeline Apollo, a longtime board member, is the new board chair, and Brook Lenfest is the vice chair. Both are prepared to make significant strides by developing an ambitious vision plan for the Avenue, supported by the nationally recognized design firms Gensler and OJB. This plan aims to establish a framework for the physical and visual reimagining of the Avenue, creating an iconic identity for the Avenue of the Arts as the "Center Stage" of the city and region. The full implementation of this plan will be a long-term project that requires substantial financial support and stakeholder backing. An initial stage of the project is expected to launch in conjunction with the city's participation in the 250th Anniversary of the nation in 2026.

Board Chair Apollo stated: "AAI remains focused on the future. Looking ahead to the next decade and beyond, our goal is to continue enhancing Philadelphia's premier destination with exciting improvements that strengthen its role as a vibrant economic hub and a welcoming gathering place for all who live in and visit Philadelphia."