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Futurama



Philadelphia should sell tomorrow as much as it sells yesterday.

by Nora Barry

I was recently invited to give a presentation at the School of Art, Culture and Communication in Malmö, Sweden. Until about seven years ago, Malmö was a ghost town due to the demise of the shipbuilding industry. Now, however, it buzzes with activity from 240 software companies, and a university renowned for interactive art. So, the director of the institute turns to me and says, "You're from Philadelphia -- the Constitution was written there, yes?" Well, yes, I wanted to say, but a whole hell of a lot has happened here since then. But I didn't say it, because, frankly, that's how Philadelphia sells itself to the rest of the world.

Philadelphia markets its past -- so much so that we are mired in it. Tourists who stop here for the day take away only postcards of a flag and a bell and the general impression that Philadelphia retired at the end of the 18th century. While we sell our colonial history, our achievements in the centuries since then have been as revolutionary, especially in the fields of information and media technology. Philadelphia companies and citizens have created or contributed to the creation of technological firsts in cinema, radio, television, computers and broadband networks. And that's just media technology. There have been equally important firsts in bio-tech and chem-tech.

Achievements in technology continue to happen every day in the Philadelphia area. But you'd never know it, because these achievements are never promoted here -- despite the fact that this city spends a lot of money trying to attract and retain tech-based companies. So, how do we change that? We showcase our accomplishments by building a museum -- a museum that's as much about Philadelphia's *future* as it is its past. A museum of technological innovation.

Because technology changes all the time, a tech museum would never be mired in the past. It would publicize what was created here and demonstrate how those breakthroughs continue to shape technology today. For example, an exhibit could highlight the Philco 525 line TV-screen format, and compare it to the development of Motorola's HDTV. The room-size ENIAC could be brought out of mothballs and installed beside a laptop. An exhibit about Kevlar could be timed to coincide with the annual bike race.

I've seen technology museums in other countries -- specifically, Ars Electronica in Austria and the ZKM in Germany -- and their exhibits are enthralling. Recent displays include: "Gulliver's Box," an exhibit showcasing the real-time capture of motion video for inclusion in games; *Little Red Riding Hood in Cyberspace*, a 3-D book that visitors can read, see, enter and experience; "Re:Mark," an exhibit that translates sounds and phonemes into distinctive signs and symbols; "Future Cinema," which examines the impact of computers and the Web on filmmaking. Neither Ars nor the ZKM are in cities with as rich a history as Philly's and yet their innovative exhibits have made the museums a destination for visitors throughout Europe, Asia and the U.S.

The competition in the U.S. for a technology museum is slim and that lack of competition is the one of several very good reasons to build a tech museum here. If we're adding to Museum Mile, wouldn't it make sense to construct something no one else has? Another reason is that a tech museum would be a perfect complement to the museum of sound being planned for a 2005 opening on the Camden Waterfront. A third important reason -- one that goes hand-in-glove with business development -- is that a technology museum could also highlight what is in development in the region, as well as what other companies around the world are developing, based on Philadelphia firsts. It could serve as an inspiration for up-and-coming area innovators and be the scene of lectures, demonstrations and conferences. Finally, a tech museum is a museum for the next generation of tourists -- the under-21 crowd. They consume information and education differently than we do, and for them, the classic 19th-century museum model won't cut it. I speak from experience on this topic: I have taken my 12- and 13-year-old sons to the museums since they were both in strollers. Art, military, history, science, pop culture (did I mention art?) -- you name it, we've been there. Yet the only time I had to physically drag them out of a museum was when we visited the ZKM, where they spent five hours wandering through



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...y were they so enthralled? The exhibits helped them understand the
...which they live.

...as much to the future as it has to the past, and we ought to sell that
...say, yes, we wrote the Constitution here, but we also built your
computer and designed your TV and engineered your cable modem (all tools, by the way, of modern democracy). So
let's get our heads out of the past and build a monument to our future: the ongoing revolution.

Nora Barry has produced and curated digital media and Web cinema for Ars Electronica, the ZKM, the Pompidou and USC Annenberg.



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