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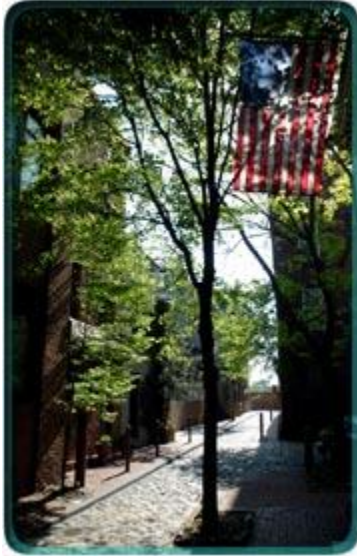
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CITYSPACE

Walk This Way



Tour Du Source: Cuthbert Street in Old City is a prime destination for Walk Philadelphia.

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Your feet won't fail you on an architectural tour of Philly.

by Darren Fava and Paula Spilner

If you've ever explored Boston by Foot, taken a Heritage Hike in San Francisco, sailed past skyscrapers in Chicago, done the MiMo walk in Miami Beach or toured the art deco gems of Victoria, British Columbia, then you've taken part in an ever-growing movement that utilizes volunteer guides to educate people on the social and cultural relevance of architecture and design.

These diverse efforts are helping reduce the number of Americans who are increasingly becoming, in the words of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, "architectural illiterates."

If car-dominated Los Angeles can offer a diverse mix of walking tours (sponsored by the Los Angeles Conservancy), then surely Philadelphia, with an eminently more walkable environment and 300 years of architectural excellence, has stories to tell and people who want to tell them.

That's the goal of the 100 volunteers of the Walk Philadelphia program.

Walk Philadelphia is the recent incarnation of the popular, 19-year-old architectural walking-tour program formerly run by the Foundation for Architecture. Currently under the management of the Center City District, the program and its guides are dedicated to enhancing public appreciation and understanding of Philadelphia's rich architectural heritage. The work of the guides fosters an architecturally literate community prepared to preserve and enrich Philadelphia's built environment.

The guides include men and women, Philly natives and recent arrivals, suburbanites and city dwellers. While a handful are architects and design professionals, most hail from an array of other professional backgrounds -- advertising, teaching, banking, law, nursing, business and even nuclear engineering. Some of the guides have been at it since the program began, but new guides are "inducted" yearly -- 17 new guides just finished a 12-week guide-training program, the equivalent of a college semester course. Besides commitment, what they share is passion for the unmatched architectural heritage of the city and region, and a desire to share that with others.

Take Jim Feeney, for example. A native of Wyndmoor, Feeney spent his professional life as an academic administrator in Florida. Upon retirement, he and his wife, Cynthia, visited many cities, including Chicago, Boston and New York, but found they were returning to Philadelphia. So after some research, they moved here. Why did Feeney leave sunny Sarasota for chilly Philly? "I lived in retirement paradise as a working person, but when I retired I found it wasn't paradise -- it was boring!" Philadelphia, on the other hand, had "a rich fabric -- textures, layers of history, a variety of architectural and cultural opportunities, and also the people -- all ages and backgrounds, newcomers and old-timers. It's just invigorating!"

The Feeneys took several of the architecture tours while debating their move to the city. After they moved here, they continued to take the tours, always finding them "a wonderful way to discover where you live and where other people live." Becoming a guide was a logical extension for Feeney to learn more about his surroundings and share that knowledge with others.

Another guide trainee, Anita Schecter, grew up at 45th and Lancaster before moving to the suburbs. For 19 years she longed to move back to the city. Then, as she explains, "When the last kid moved off to college, my husband and I sublet a place in Manhattan." Later, they found life in Philadelphia more manageable and moved to Center City. Schecter sees the tour program as a way of opening people's eyes, "I get tired of people saying nasty things about my city. If more people knew more about it they'd realize what a great place it is! One way to get them to know is through this program."



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ney and Schecter just completed features lectures by distinguished
view the history of Western architecture, then focus on Philadelphia's
as well as its most notable architects. Additional Saturday workshops
such as "How to Read a Building," "Philadelphia: Before and After" and

After completing the course, the guides choose a tour to study and conduct -- first with another trained guide, then later on their own. Guides are provided with a basic route and building hit list, but are encouraged to develop an individual perspective when conducting their tours.

Each season, May through December, rain or shine, 50 different tours are offered, ranging from the ever-popular "Littlest Streets" to "Skyscrapers Old and New." Some tour-takers become regulars, like David Thomas of Malvern. "Every time I take one of these tours I learn something new," he says. "The opportunity is really priceless."

"I've lived here all my life and I've never learned so much," wrote another satisfied tour taker.

Walk Philadelphia tours begin Saturday, May 1 and continue through December. For a list of tours or for more information, call 215-625-WALK or visit www.walkphiladelphia.com. Darren Fava is the manager of streetscape initiatives at the Center City District and oversees the Walk Philadelphia tour program. Paula Spilner, a Walk Philadelphia volunteer guide for 12 years, currently serves as a consultant, managing the daily operations of the tour program.



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