

PHILLY HITS NEW HEIGHTS

Known for its rich history, Philadelphia also has its sights set firmly on the future

WORDS HANNAH BRANDLER

Touch down in Philadelphia International airport and you are immediately reminded of the city's history as the birthplace of the United

States. Extracts from the Declaration of Independence, signed here in 1776, are emblazoned across the walls of the arrivals hall, beaming in blue light. Yet, as you drive towards downtown you'll be met by a glistening glimpse of the city's future. Far from inconspicuous, US cable giant Comcast's new Technology Center dominates the skyline, towering above the rest of the city at 341 metres high.

If you haven't heard of Comcast, you'll certainly be familiar with its subsidiaries – NBC Universal, Focus Features and Dreamworks Animation, to name a few. In 2018, the Fortune 500 company expanded its European presence

with the US\$40 billion purchase of Sky, while next month it will join the streaming wars, launching NBC Universal's Peacock service to rival the likes of Netflix and Apple TV Plus.

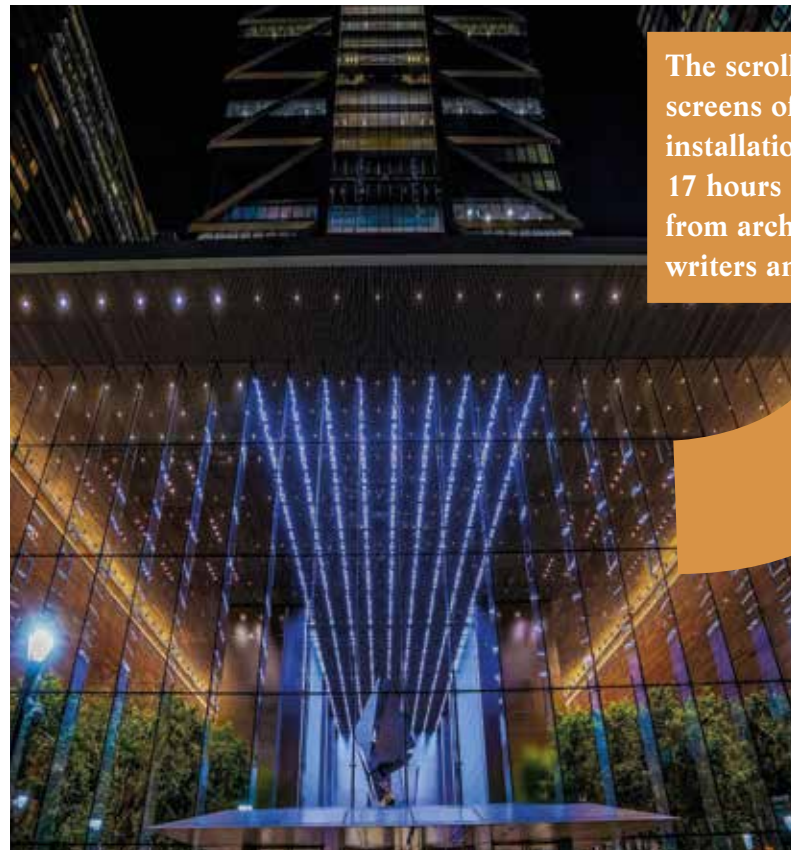
Founded in the 1960s by Ralph Roberts, Comcast has become the largest cable TV and broadband provider in the US and, since the Sky acquisition, possibly the world's biggest provider of pay TV, according to Wharton School. It has also conquered the Philadelphia cityscape with two skyscrapers in the Center City business district – its corporate HQ, Comcast Tower, gained the US\$1.5 billion Technology Center as a neighbour in 2018, designed by Norman Foster.

Construction of the city's tallest building wasn't without controversy. Legend has it that buildings exceeding the height of the statue of city

founder William Penn atop City Hall have cursed Philadelphia's sports teams – “There's always next year”, goes Philly's hopeful expression. Construction workers, however, topped the Technology Center with a Penn figurine and it seems to have done the trick – the Philadelphia Eagles won the Super Bowl for the first time in 2018, beating reigning champions New England Patriots.

COME ON IN

What's most appealing about the building, however, is that it has been designed for the use of locals as well as staff. Much like London's new Bloomberg headquarters, also designed by Foster and Partners, Comcast's two-level atrium is open to the public and comes complete with a café, winter garden and innovative artwork. It's an astounding space, with →



The scrolling screens of Holzer's installation transmit 17 hours of quotes from architects, writers and children

LEFT: Jenny Holzer's *For Philadelphia*
BELOW: Ben Franklin bridge

Jenny Holzer's digital installation *For Philadelphia* spanning the entire ceiling, bouncing off the reflective panels of Conrad Shawcross's *Exploded Paradigm* tetrahedron.

I found it impossible to avert my gaze from Holzer's opus, the scrolling screens of which transmit 17 hours of quotes from architects, Philadelphia-based writers and schoolchildren. You can also visit the Universal Sphere Experience, a 360-degree dome theatre on the first floor, although prepare yourself for a rather cheesy film about the power of innovation.

"I felt there was an appetite to make this building permeable, for it to be a part of the local community," Foster explained during a discussion with Comcast chief executive Brian Roberts in October last year.

Designed with the company's 4,000 technologists and scientific engineers in mind, the interiors scream Silicon Valley. Three-storey loft spaces filled with beanbags and ping-pong tables encourage free-flowing ideas and collaborative work, while an entire floor is dedicated to the LIFT (Leveraging Innovation for Tomorrow) Labs incubator for start-ups. "We help [start-ups] meet potential investors and partners, work with them on storytelling and encourage them to test and pilot with us," D'Arcy Rudnay, Comcast's executive vice-president and chief communications officer, explains.

Comcast has also extended beyond telecoms into the world of hospitality, filling the building's top 12 floors with a Four Seasons hotel (reviewed at [business traveller.com](https://www.business traveller.com)), of which it owns 80 per cent.

"We built our headquarters in the centre of the city for a reason: to create a vertical campus for our employees to work and innovate, and a place our community and visitors could come and enjoy," Rudnay says. "The idea for a hotel was born from that goal, to build something unique that would add to the vibrancy of our city. And not just any hotel, but one that would be among the best in the world."

MICHAEL PENNISTOCK



CONNECTED CITY

Some 42 per cent of the city's jobs are located in the 5.4 sq km Center City. To connect the new building with Comcast Tower across the road, Foster and Partners created an underground concourse area filled with food outlets, which also links to Suburban station (confusingly, located in the heart of town and not in the suburbs). I'm told that 90 per cent of the Comcast workforce arrives by public transport, and it also improves connections for other city workers.

Aside from the subway, Philadelphia has great domestic and international transport links. Sandwiched between two major US power hubs – New York and Washington DC – it's a popular stop for business travellers commuting along the Northeastern corridor. Amtrak's Acela Express reaches both cities within two hours, and the high-speed Washington DC-Boston service was the rail provider's busiest service in 2018.

Meanwhile, the city saw a 7.5 per cent year-on-year increase in overseas visitors in 2018, with the UK retaining the title as its top overseas market since the turn of the century.

In tandem with this, the hotel scene is booming, seeing a larger annual rise in room occupancy than any other US city in 2018, according to the *Philadelphia Business Journal*. There has been a 300 per cent increase in hotel construction in the past two years. Along with the 219-room Four Seasons, additions in Center City last year include the 499-room Notary Hotel, part of Marriott's Autograph Collection, and the millennial-targeting



DOWNTIME TIPS

WHAT TO SEE

Known colloquially as Museum Mile, the Champs-Élysées-inspired Benjamin Franklin Parkway houses the Barnes Foundation and the Free Library of Philadelphia, culminating at the legendary Rocky Steps (pictured), which lead up to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

WHERE TO EAT

Lebanese restaurant Suraya (below left), in Fishtown, specialises in sharing plates. Choose the "A Taste of Suraya" menu (US\$58), which includes a selection of mezze, followed by a large meat or seafood plate, and dessert. I recommend the Kanafeh, a pastry filled with melted cheese curd (a combo of cream cheese and mozzarella, in this case) and topped with rose blossom syrup and crushed pistachios. [surayaphilly.com](https://www.surayaphilly.com)

WHERE TO SHOP

Head to Rittenhouse Row for local boutiques and luxury department stores, or take advantage of the city's tax-free clothes shopping at the recently opened Fashion District retail centre.

Pod Philly. Stylish private members' house Fittler Club also opened its doors, with 14 rooms that can be booked by non-members.

Stalwarts such as the Rittenhouse and the Renaissance Philadelphia Downtown, meanwhile, have undergone multimillion-dollar renovations in the past two years. The Philadelphia Marriott Old City rebranded from a Sheraton last year.

The city anticipates adding around 2,700 hotel rooms this year, to include the May arrival of Canopy by Hilton in Center City, the first-ever co-located W and Element properties



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Pod Philly; the Rittenhouse; the Fittler Club



norm, whereby colleges educated men for the clergy. It continues to promote innovation across its departments, notably at the world's oldest business school, Wharton. Later this year, Tangen Hall, the school's first dedicated space for cross-campus student entrepreneurship, will open in University City, providing incubator spaces, a test kitchen for food start-ups and a virtual reality environment.

Still, more needs to be done to ensure that all of the city's residents can flourish. Philadelphia remains the poorest major city in the US, with one of the highest crime rates, in part owing to its lagging employment rate. Last November, the US Bureau of Labour Statistics reported that the city's annual rate of growth was slower than the national average (1 per cent versus 1.5 per cent).

Things are looking up – the poverty rate declined from 25.7 per cent in 2016 to 24.5 per cent in 2018, the lowest it has been since the global recession in 2008, according to the US Census Bureau. "Philadelphia changes slowly but powerfully," Sorrentino says, adding that the universities are poised to play a big role in the global economy thanks to their medical research.

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TOP: Pennovation Works LEFT: Reading Terminal Market BELOW: University of Pennsylvania



and a Hyatt Centric near Rittenhouse Square in June. The Live Casino and Hotel is due to open in South Philadelphia in December, creating 2,000 permanent jobs in the city.

KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

While for overseas visitors Philly is primarily a tourism destination – leisure travellers made up 88 per cent of visitors in 2019 – it still draws a strong business crowd. Major industries include biotech, healthcare, financial services, telecommunications and higher education.

Its Ivy League institution, the University of Pennsylvania, is the largest private employer in the city thanks to its "Eds and Meds" facilities – a nickname for its impressive

education and medical departments. The university generates US\$10.8 billion for the Philadelphian economy and attracts talent to the city thanks to its approximately US\$1 billion worth of research grants, according to a study it carried out in 2015.

"More scholars and researchers are moving to Philadelphia to be associated with the university and its hospitals... particularly in the field of gene therapy," Anthony Sorrentino, its assistant vice-president, tells me. "It's a significant reputation builder [for the city]."

It was founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1751 to train young people for leadership in business, government and public service – a departure from the 18th-century

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TURKISH AIRLINES

NIGERIA

PHILLY HITS NEW HEIGHTS

BOOSTING INNOVATION IN THE CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE

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→ One such example is the university's Pennovation Works, a nine-hectare technology park that aims to transform innovative ideas within the industries of biotech, robotics, AI and medicine into economic opportunities for the neighbourhood. The site houses a combination of offices, labs and co-working areas, occupied by both start-ups, who are drawn to the site's various accelerators, and companies Johnson and Johnson and Hershey's. Sorrentino sums it up as "emblematic of the new Philadelphia knowledge economy, shifting away from the older industrial economy".

Greater Philadelphia also retains 54 per cent of its college graduates, according to Campus Philly's *Philadelphia Renaissance* 2019 report.

CONTINUOUS REINVENTION

For a city that could feasibly rely on its history to attract visitors, Philadelphia doesn't sit idly by. "All of America's history started here, so you'll always have that core foundation, but the city continues to reinvent itself [through] all the cultural institutions and world-class art," Ben Shank, general manager of the Four Seasons, says. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, for instance, is undergoing a US\$196 million renovation by Frank Gehry that will add more than 2,000 sqm of gallery space this autumn. The Penn Museum is undergoing a phased transformation, set to finish in 2023, while the city's former opera house reopened as concert venue the Met Philadelphia in 2018.

At the same time, the working class neighbourhood of Fishtown, northeast

of Center City, has transformed into an up-and-coming hotspot. Formerly a commercial fishing base, the district's industrial warehouses are now filled with lively restaurants, galleries and music venues. When Shank first started out in Philadelphia, "it was one of those areas you wouldn't have gravitated towards, but now it's exploding with residential [properties] and restaurants", he says. "That's what's neat about the city. It keeps pushing out really great areas."

Comcast founder Ralph Roberts once said: "A business is only as strong as the community it operates in." This seems to be a recurring theme in the so-called City of Brotherly Love, a name that initially meant little to me but personified the area rather well by the end of my visit.

Take the dining scene, which extends far beyond Philly's famed cheesesteaks and cream cheese. Shank says: "A lot of chefs train in high-profile restaurants in other US cities but return to Philadelphia because it's more affordable." Kimberly Barrett, international communications manager for the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau, adds that many restaurants are owned and operated by chefs rather than chains or outposts. "Everyone is very supportive of one another and that's what makes the culinary scene so successful," she says. Award-winning chefs Michael Solomonov and Greg Vernick have both set up several acclaimed restaurants here, while the Four Seasons has brought Jean-Georges Vongerichten's haute cuisine to the city.

Then there's the more casual but no less enticing fare on offer in Philly's many bakeries and markets – Reading Terminal Market, one of the oldest in the US, warrants multiple visits to sample some of its 80 stalls. On my last day in the city, I took a detour here to stock up on some snacks for the journey home. When I had arrived a few days earlier, my cab driver had warned me that I would gain "a few pounds" during my stay. Armed with a gigantic lox bagel and cinnamon pretzel, I did indeed return home a little wider – and historically wiser – than before. **BT**

RIGHT OF PASSAGE

MAKING AIR TRAVEL MORE ACCESSIBLE

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→ into the aircraft door area to allow enough room for a PRM and a carer, increasing the space by about 40 per cent. Access is through the corner, providing more wheelchair room, and the door fully closes behind two people. It has numerous grab rails, bright lighting, and taps are reachable from the toilet. Feedback from a group of PRMs is being used to fine-tune the prototype.

There is a sense that change is in the air. Lundy says five or six years ago she would never have had schedule clashes when giving talks on access, yet recently she has found herself speaking at three events in a day. In November last year, IATA (the International Air Transport Association) held a symposium on the issue in Dubai. Used to seeing the same 30 or so people at events, Lundy says it was "amazing" to see more than 150 attendees.

It came after IATA passed a resolution committing members to providing "safe, reliable and dignified travel" for those with disabilities. It also asked the UN's International Civil Aviation Organisation to "help harmonise national legislation and regulations which otherwise could create a patchwork of confusing or even contradictory requirements for passengers and airlines". In short: to produce a clear rulebook on the standards and services airports and airlines should provide, wherever a passenger is travelling.

Heathrow's Sara Marchant believes the outlook is positive. "We're on the crest of a wave, there's such momentum behind it," she says. "People's expectations have changed, and they expect things to be done in a way that suits them best."

Christopher Wood is more cautious. "There were a lot of soundbites [at the IATA meeting] but we will see what happens," he says. "This is a trade association with 290 airlines. If they turned around and said, 'We are going to make our aircraft accessible,' something would immediately get done. I was at the symposium, and I had lots of conversations. But I'm getting tired of conversations. We need to stop talking and start creating." **BT**



Image: © Torsten Dickmann

The Seychelles – Perfect!

With almost year-round sunshine and a backdrop of endless blue sea and sky, the Seychelles Islands are just perfect!



Image: © Chris Close



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