

A Third Act for Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts

By LISA CHAMBERLAIN

PHILADELPHIA — Like a three-movement symphony, the Avenue of the Arts along South Broad Street here has been created in three distinct phases, though it has been playing out over many years.

The first phase cultivated live performing arts; the second phase focused on attracting supporting commercial and retail tenants; and now the third movement: new residential development, much of it directly linked to the arts.

The Avenue of the Arts designation originally applied to the section of South Broad Street stretching from City Hall to Washington Street, but it was later expanded to include part of North Broad Street.

Symphony House, still under construction but partly occupied and 80 percent sold, is a 31-story condominium building on the Avenue of the Arts at Broad and Pine Streets. The tower will have ground-level retailing, including a high-end grocery store. In addition, it houses the 350-seat Suzanne Roberts Theater, built for the Philadelphia Theater Company.

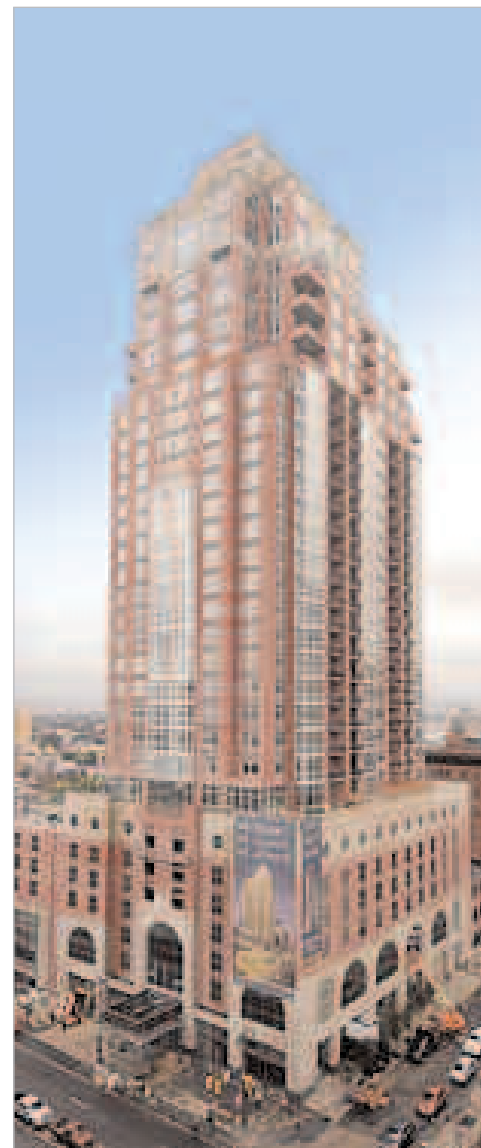
While this is the first ground-up condo project to open on the Avenue of the Arts, it will not be a solo performance for long.

A contemporary midrise building at South and Broad, 1352 Lofts, is now partly occupied. There is also a three-phase project being constructed called the Artisan, which will have 30 new contemporary town houses. And the City Council recently approved a major mixed-use project at the southern gateway of the Avenue of the Arts at Broad and Washington; it is to have 860 rentals and condominiums, 30 to 50 stores, and 1,500 parking spaces on about 5.5 acres.

In the not-too-distant future, the developer of Symphony House, Carl E. Dranoff, and a Philadelphia soul music pioneer, Ken Gamble, will announce details of the National Center for Rhythm and Blues, a \$250 million 60,000-square-foot museum of Philadelphia's musical heritage; the project includes studios, offices and retail spaces made financially feasible by two high-rise residential towers.

"Four years ago, when Symphony House was approved by the city, despite all the amenities along the Avenue of the Arts, it was not seen as a residential area," said Mr. Dranoff, president of Dranoff Properties. "It has become a 24-hour district."

Leveraging the arts to redevelop what was once Philadelphia's financial district



Symphony House condominiums.

has taken a long time. According to Paul R. Levy, president of the Center City District, a nonprofit business improvement organization, the concept was discussed as far back as the 1970s to remedy the problem of obsolete commercial buildings on Broad Street south of City Hall. The classical buildings, many of them banks, lost their usefulness as commercial functions shifted north and west into modern office buildings.



The Kimmel Center, home of the Philadelphia Orchestra on Avenue of the Arts.

But it wasn't until 1993 when the mayor at the time, Ed Rendell, founded the Avenue of the Arts Inc., an independent nonprofit organization to coordinate and oversee the district's growth, that the idea took hold.

"On a Saturday night in 1991, you could walk the mile from City Hall to Washington Avenue and you wouldn't have seen 100 people," said Mr. Rendell, who is now Pennsylvania's governor. "Now you walk around on a Thursday night, you see thousands of people on the street. It's not yet complete, but it's come a long way. If you had told me people would buy \$1 million condos on the avenue, I wouldn't have believed it."

Governor Rendell would not have been the only skeptic. At the time, South Broad Street was home to one theater, the Merriam; an arts school, which occupied a single building; and many half-vacant commercial spaces.

Since then, both the Wilma and Prince Music Theater have opened, and the University of the Arts, an arts college, has expanded its mission as well as its space, renovating six buildings along the avenue. A high school for the performing arts

was founded on the avenue as well. There are also the Clef Club, featuring jazz, and the Firehouse Art Center, along with smaller galleries and stages.

But the crown jewel is the Kimmel Center, designed by Rafael Viñoly, which is home to the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Opera Company of Philadelphia and the Academy of Music.

Shortly before the Kimmel Center opened in 2001, the Ritz-Carlton hotel chain made a highly visible move to the Avenue of the Arts, starting the second phase of development with commercial and retail projects, including the Capital Grille and Palm restaurants. Then, the Park Hyatt Hotel opened with the Shops at Bellevue, which attracted more retailing.

After that, the new residential building began; that is now under way in earnest. "We're in a virtuous cycle of good begetting good," Mr. Levy said. "Symphony House is putting icing on the cake, building off the arts brand and geographically stretching the district, and now there's more development."

The variety of housing options also seems to be keeping the avenue's

residential market buoyant. While Symphony House is a new high-rise, the apartments have a traditional feel and layout, designed to appeal to people moving to the city from the suburbs who don't want to live in a cavernous concrete space.

At 1352 Lofts, developed and designed by Rimas Properties to attract buyers from a more adventurous demographic group, the 72 units (30 are already occupied) have high ceilings, open staircases and floor plans and lots of glass.

According to the developer of the Artisan, Joseph Williams, the homes, which start at \$900,000 and run up to \$2.2 million, are selling about as fast as he can build them. As town houses, these units present a housing style that is more familiar in this city than high-rise apartments.

"What's really making the region work is that it's considerably cheaper than New York and Washington," Joel Kotkin, author of "The City: A Global History," said. "Arts districts are nice, but the key question is, Will cities begin to focus on families and keeping the middle class?"