

## A Fight Over the Art Museum Will Gehry Knock Out Rocky?

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

If Frank Gehry's \$350 million design for the expansion of the Philadelphia Museum of Art is implemented, recessed steps and a 24-foot window may be inserted in the middle of the 72 iconic "Rocky Steps" on the east side of the Museum. The new window is supposed to entice step-climbers, when they reach the top, to enter the Museum and view the art. Through the new window, climbers will see some artworks inside, and gallery visitors will look out at the Philadelphia skyline. The design has not yet obtained final approval, and the Museum staff is interested in opinions from the public. Anyone who wishes to express an opinion can write directly to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

In June, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran an online poll to find out how readers felt about this proposed change. Although it was close, more readers voted for "I like Gehry's bold vision for the steps" than voted for "Why change a good thing? Keep 'em as is." In July, the *Inquirer* published occasional letters to the editor weighing in on either side. More published letters were against the change than for it. Informal conversations with Philadelphia area residents indicate that many people oppose the alteration and love the steps as they are.

Beginning with the Oscar-winning film *Rocky* in 1976, the steps became widely known as the Rocky Steps after they played a significant role in the popular Philadelphia-based six-movie series. In a now-legendary scene from that first Rocky film, the title character, Rocky Balboa (played by Sylvester Stallone), finishes a grueling training run by ascending the steps' daunting heights and exulting at the top, arms raised triumphantly, to the tune of "Gonna Fly Now." The Rocky Steps appeared in four of the five sequels. Rocky was the first sports film to win an Academy Award for Best Picture. In 2006, it was ranked fourth on the American Film Institute's 100 Most Inspiring Movies of All Time.

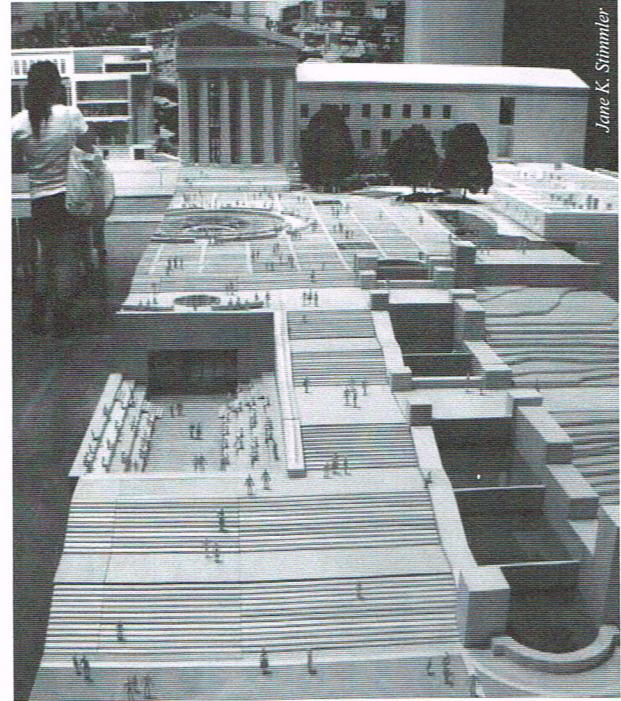
In 2010, *Time* named the Philadelphia Museum of Art steps one of the top ten iconic movie locations in cinema history. According to VisitPhilly, the Rocky Steps and the Rocky Statue (depicting the fictional

boxing hero) are two of the most famous tourist attractions in Philadelphia, and each year tens of thousands of people, including international visitors, climb the steps. Locals and tourists have written rave reviews about the Rocky Steps on Yelp ([www.yelp.com/biz/rocky-steps-no-title](http://www.yelp.com/biz/rocky-steps-no-title)).

Writer Michael Vitez and photographer Tom Gralish, both staffers at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, spent a year creating a book, *Rocky Stories: Tales of Love, Hope, and Happiness at America's Most Famous Steps*. Vitez says in the introduction, "During the 20 years I have lived in the Philadelphia area, I have seen people from all over the world come here and run the steps. As they run, and when they reach the top of the museum steps, they all share a certain momentary joy. The Rocky Steps... offer a tonic to the world's problems, a chance to celebrate hope."

Many Philadelphians remember the scene in *Rocky II* (1979) in which a bunch of Philadelphia public-school kids ran up the Rocky Steps behind Sylvester Stallone. Kristin Lawler fondly remembers participating in that scene at age 9. Lawler writes, "Following Rocky up the steps is one of the proudest moments of my life." Lawler now holds a Ph.D. in sociology and is an associate professor and head of the sociology department at the College of Mount Saint Vincent, Bronx, NY. In her opinion, "the steps are perfect as they are... the stunning, fluid, classical design, the accessibility via the Parkway, the uninterrupted vista of the city... they are the pinnacle of the city."

Expressing praise for the change, Center City resident Dianne Reed says, "The window would be an exciting visual element in the façade and break up the monumentality of the steps. If illuminated at night, it might look magical." Dottie Leonard, who used to live near the Parkway and often directed out-of-towners to the



A large-scale architectural model depicts Gehry's proposed changes to the "Rocky Steps."

Rocky Steps, is not opposed to the change, and says there will still be room for running, sledding, and biking on the steps.

Movies have become a big business in Philadelphia. Sharon Pinkenson, executive director of the Greater Philadelphia Film Office, has been bringing filmmakers to Philadelphia for two decades, ever since her appointment by Mayor Ed Rendell in 1992. According to a 2012 Ernst & Young report on the economic benefits of tax credits for film production in 37 states, "In some cases, widely viewed films have increased tourism to featured locations by more than 25%." To see a list of all the movies shot in Philadelphia, go to: [www.phillymag.com/news/2012/11/14/movies-set-filmed-philadelphia-complete-guide/](http://www.phillymag.com/news/2012/11/14/movies-set-filmed-philadelphia-complete-guide/).

Art and architecture also bring in tourists. Aiming to promote Philadelphia as one of the world's great art destinations, the City of Philadelphia launched its campaign With Art Philadelphia in 2012, to draw more visitors and to generate more overnight stays. The campaign was designed to coincide with the May 2012 opening of the new Barnes on the Parkway. Later that year, *Lonely Planet* named Philadelphia one of the top ten U.S.

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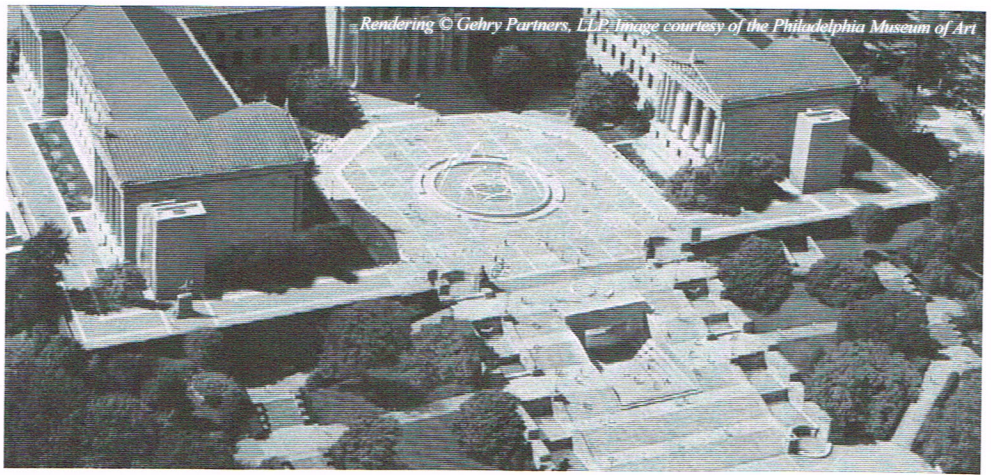


destinations for 2013. The publisher said Philadelphia is “becoming known as an art capital” and mentioned the Philadelphia

Museum of Art, the Barnes Foundation, and new neighborhood galleries as examples.

In 2006, the Philadelphia Museum of Art commissioned world-renowned architect Frank Gehry to design a plan to expand the building’s usable space from the inside by adding new galleries for large-scale sculpture and art installations, to enhance access, to improve pathways through the Museum, to bring in more natural light, and to open a street-level entrance. The Museum was first opened to the public in 1928, and officials hope to complete the alterations by 2028 in time for the Museum’s centennial.

Center City artist and architect Ed Bronstein says "my only wish about the design is that Gehry use his more playful 'tumbling glass' for the new exit stairs at the ends of the North and South wings, rather than the more conservative matching Kasota stone towers now planned."



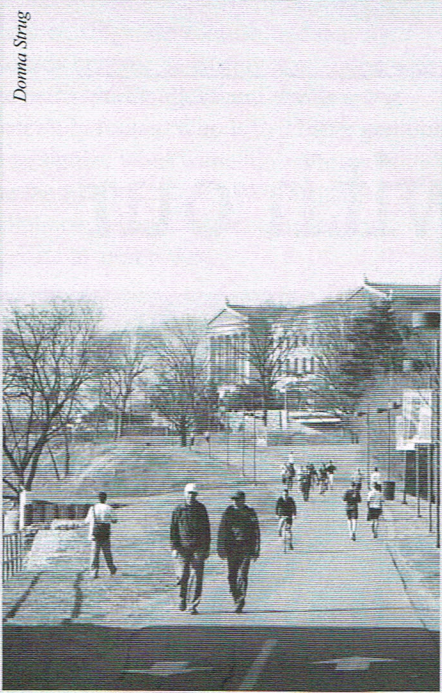
One optional design for the galleries below the East Terrace offers a view of the city through a large window.

Perhaps Gehry’s most famous building is the Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain. Philip Johnson, known as the “godfather of modern architecture,” in 1998 called Gehry the “greatest architect we have today” and declared the Guggenheim Bilbao the “greatest building of our time,” according to Matt Tyrnauer, a writer for *Vanity Fair*. In *Vanity Fair*’s 2010 survey of experts, including winners of the Pritzker Architecture Prize and deans of major architecture schools, the Guggenheim Bilbao led the

voting for the most significant structure built since 1980. Today the Bilbao is one of the top tourist destinations in Europe.

Questions remain: Will inserting a window in the Rocky Steps draw more visitors inside the Museum? If a chunk of the Rocky Steps is removed from the center, will they still be a major attraction? Sharon Pinkenson says, “Maybe Rocky’s great-grandchildren will think it’s perfect for another sequel. You never know.”

### Apart from the Rocky Steps, What Do Visitors Like in Philly?



Visitors and residents alike enjoy the Schuylkill Path.

Last year, Mandi Woodruff rode the Bolt Bus from Manhattan to Philadelphia to write an article for *Business Insider*, reporting on her wonderful experiences in the first four hours of her visit to our city.

Here’s what she loved: being able to walk downtown without dodging tourists, the convenient gourmet food trucks offering different ethnic cuisines, the outdoor seating area at 30th Street Station, the safe walking and biking path along the Schuylkill River, the fast checkout lines at Trader Joe’s, the cheap and delicious food at Reading Terminal Market, the ubiquitous outdoor murals, and the mix of old and new architecture ([www.businessinsider.com/ive-only-been-in-philly-for-4-hours-and-i-already-see-why-people-love-it-2013-5](http://www.businessinsider.com/ive-only-been-in-philly-for-4-hours-and-i-already-see-why-people-love-it-2013-5)).

In *Travel and Leisure*’s 2013 visitor survey, “America’s Favorite Cities,” Philadelphia ranked number one or two out of 35 cities in five categories. Our city’s top features were passionate sports fans, theatre and performance art, sandwiches and delis, free attractions, and the Fourth of July celebration.

According to VisitPhilly, the most-visited attractions in the City of Philadelphia include the historic sites of Independence National Historical Park, the National Constitution Center, and the Betsy Ross House, as well as the Philadelphia



Trompe l'oeil mural at 22nd & Walnut "reflects" a church that once stood next door.

Museum of Art. Visitors are also drawn to culinary destinations like the Reading Terminal Market, and the science and family-centered attractions at the Philadelphia Zoo, the Please Touch Museum, the Franklin Institute, and Franklin Square. *U.S. News* echoed many of these destinations in their list “Best Things to Do in Philadelphia,” and also recommended Rittenhouse Square, Eastern State Penitentiary, and the Masonic Temple.

If you are hosting visitors and want to get an update on what’s happening, go to [www.uwishunu.com](http://www.uwishunu.com).

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