

The Athenaeum of Philadelphia Strategic Framework 2026-2031: “A Blueprint for Growth: People, Programs, Place”

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Introduction: How We Grow

The Athenaeum of Philadelphia's "Blueprint for Growth" celebrates our distinctive "community of the curious". Our priorities center People, Programs and Place in our quest to serve a growing and changing region. We recognize The Athenaeum's vital role as a steward of Greater Philadelphia's architectural and literary history, as a partner amplifying city-wide arts and culture and as a neighborhoods-focused forum for discovery and discourse. These priorities align with The Athenaeum's mission, vision and values.

The "Blueprint for Growth" is designed as a dynamic framework for action rather than a static roadmap. In a rapidly evolving world marked by continuous technological and social change, The Athenaeum must remain agile. While the core priorities—People, Programs and Place—are enduring, the specific metrics and goals under each pillar will be continuously reviewed, evaluated and revised by the Board and staff. This commitment to responsiveness ensures that The Athenaeum sustains its relevance, maximizes its impact and remains a vital forum for discovery and discourse for generations to come.

History

Founded in 1814 for the pursuit of "useful knowledge" with a reading room, lecture space, chess room and historical collections, The Athenaeum continues to evolve as a place to pursue general knowledge in a communal setting.

In 1847, The Athenaeum moved from rental spaces into its permanent home on Washington Square designed by architect John Notman. Developed over the past 60 years, our archival collections serve as one of the largest and most important regional architectural archives in the country. The Athenaeum celebrates and stewards its National Historical Landmark building and its circulating and research collections for the continued pursuit of knowledge.

As a historic membership library, The Athenaeum serves members and the interested public with programs and research opportunities. We forge bridges across arts and culture in Philadelphia through partnerships and collaborations. Today, the membership and usage has dramatically increased, bringing a new-found energy and excitement to The Athenaeum.

Mission

The Athenaeum of Philadelphia nurtures curiosity in members and neighbors, strengthening community through learning and discourse.

Vision

The Athenaeum is a leading forum for discovery and discourse that builds a greater Philadelphia.

The Athenaeum is committed to:

Looking Outward – Enriching the lives of members, visitors and the community.

Learning – Fostering the pursuit of knowledge and lively conversation.

Diversity – Inviting diverse members and points of view.

Culture – Engaging with great literature, art, architecture and history, as well as the pressing issues of contemporary life.

Collaboration – Magnify our own vitality and that of our city through collaboration with mission-aligned groups.

Creativity and Innovation — Deepening our knowledge and understanding through new experiences and perspectives which strengthen community bonds.

Community and Place – Celebrating our historically important location and our urban landscape and its place in the larger world.

Blueprint: People, Programs, Place

PEOPLE: Foster an engaged and curious membership and an expanded online community.

- Continue membership growth that reflects our community and spans age, geographic location and economic status.
- Optimize member services, benefits and programming to strengthen retention of existing membership while reaching new audiences.
- Cultivate a rich virtual research and learning community through consistent engagement with online members.
- Promote appreciation of excellence and innovation in Greater Philadelphia's literary and design heritage.

PROGRAMS: Inspire deeper connections through in-person and online experiences.

- Present focused programming opportunities to encounter new ideas and perspectives that enrich participant's lives.
- Cultivate collaborative partnerships with city-wide cultural institutions and creatives to share expertise and increase our reach and vitality.
- Support creative, innovative research and knowledge creation that benefits greater Philadelphia.
- Activate our collections for transformative storytelling that reflects Greater Philadelphia and its distinct communities.

PLACE: Expand access to Greater Philadelphia's architectural, historical and literary heritage through our National Historic Landmark Building and collections.

- Position our National Historic Landmark building as a local hub where members convene for learning, conversation and a sense of belonging.
- Increase physical and digital access to collections through user-friendly portals; expert, professional guidance; and proactive stewardship.
- Undertake updates and renovations of our spaces to prioritize collaboration and connection, people and programs.
- Invite members and the interested public to partner in our efforts through gifts of financial support, skills and expertise in order to sustain and grow our programmatic and capital initiatives.

Strategic Planning Process

The Board decided to undertake a new strategic planning process in the Spring of 2025 as it prepared for the completion of the 2021-2025 plan. Working with consultant Sara Moran as an advisor, Board President Jeffrey Cooper and Executive Director Beth Hessel co-led a Strategic Planning Task Force composed of Board Directors Nora Barry, Justin Detwiler, Adele Gorrilla and Pamela Harper, and Athenaeum Associate Librarian Brice Peterson.

Over the Summer, Mr. Cooper, Dr. Hessel and former President Edward Scharff met with 20 individuals or couples for conversations. Mr. Cooper, Dr. Hessel and Development & Membership Manager Alexis Perillo organized 16 in-person focus groups that met in June and July and solicited further comments by email from all individuals who participated. In July and August, members and the public were invited to participate in a survey; 20% of the membership responded.

Through listening and reflection, the task force developed a new vision statement and priorities that focus on the primary needs and desires of the many members who shared their thoughts with us. The priorities emphasize the three points that animate The Athenaeum: people (membership, public, partners and staff); programs (the events, programs, and services that bring people together) and place (our National Historic Landmark building that welcomes community as well as our online, globally accessible collections). The priorities are also intentionally broad and flexible enough to allow The Athenaeum to move forward with responsiveness, adaptability, and sustainability.