

The future is now.

You can touch it, you can choose it, you can even park beneath it.

The \$71 million Futures Center opens today at the Franklin Institute Science Museum, and it is guaranteed to change museum-going in Philadelphia for, well, the conceivable future.

“We know our competition is Disney and the Phillies and a thousand other activities that compete for America's leisure time,” says Joel Bloom, the Franklin Institute's president. “So we've built plenty of entertainment in.”

The showpiece is the Omniverse Theater, dome-shaped with giant images on a 79-foot screen, a 170-degree field of vision, and tilted seats that point viewers toward the center of the action.

Amenities include night-time hours, two restaurants, and an underground garage for 350 cars.

And the future unfolds in walks through a human cell and a rain forest, a chance to play astronaut in a space station, and a visit to a lab to tinker with new materials.

As Franklin Institute officials describe the 90,000-square-foot Futures Center, it will be whiz-bang, if not exactly Disneyesque. It looks into the future, but not too far.

Visitors can interact with exhibits like FutureHealth, FutureSpace and FutureEarth. They will be encouraged to vote on the future on their own keypads at Future Choices Forum, and they can ponder problems such as overpopulation and acid rain.

Exhibits examine issues of the near future, and deal with technology that is in the lab or on the drawing boards.

“The main pitfall is when you predict the future, {xr}you're going to be wrong,” said William H. Booth, vice president for exhibits. “Every futurist is wrong.”

“Philadelphians love us, but I think we are sort of regarded as a place where things don't change much,” said chief executive officer Charles L. Andes.

That comfy niche brought in 726,000 visitors last year, more than one-quarter of them school kids on outings. But the city's No. 3 attraction has been far behind the Liberty Bell (1.4 million) and the Zoo (1.3 million).

The Futures Center is expected to boost the Franklin Institute's attendance to about 1.2 million people a year. And it is designed to bring in an older crowd.

Thus the evening hours, the added parking, and upscale dining from restaurateur Steve Poses, of Frog and Commissary fame. One restaurant will have a liquor license and offer an international menu. The other will provide hearty kids' fare.

Thomas Muldoon, president of the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau, sees the Futures Center as a "tremendous plus" to tourism. He said he hopes it will change the museum from a side-trip to an attraction that draws visitors to Philadelphia on its own.

Muldoon said the Franklin Institute has aggressively marketed the Futures Center at tourism conventions and among tour bus operators.

The Parkway impact is kicking in: The neighboring Please Touch Museum and Academy of Natural Sciences will stay open Wednesday nights this summer on an experimental basis.

In reaching for the future, Franklin Institute is playing its trump card.

The science museum, opened in the mid-1930s, was a pioneer in hands-on and push-button displays. Its walk-through human heart is still a marvel in the museum industry.

"Everything we've done that's successful relates to hands-on," Andes said. It has all happened quickly.

Groundbreaking was barely two years ago. It followed delicate negotiations with neighbors, who insisted the garage go underground and the restaurants eschew litter-generating carryout.

Much of the funding for the Futures Center has come from corporate contributors. And that has generated controversy about whether the Franklin Institute is, as the CityPaper asked in a headline, "selling the future."

At the Futures Center, most exhibits are sponsored by corporations linked to the subjects displayed.

According to Bloom, Institute designers consulted scientific experts at those corporations, as well as at universities, to gather the information for the exhibits. And, he said, corporate sponsors got to see the plans in advance, and could make suggestions.

However, he said, sponsors didn't have veto power over the final product, nor did any insist upon it.

Franklin officials tout the Futures Center as unique.

"Early on, we decided to do the future, but not fantasy," Booth said. "We toured Epcot, and we decided, no this isn't what we want to do at all."

Epcot, at Disney World outside Orlando, Fla., offers few hands-on exhibits and little chance to linger or learn, he said.

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There's not much on Philadelphia, except for a computer-generated projection of the skyline in the year 2000, and a short film in the Omniverse Theater titled ``Philadelphia Anthem," a montage of city scenes.

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What's in, according to Special Projects Director Ann Mintz, is the cutting edge of research and development.

``We didn't want to discourage people's enthusiasm about the future," Mintz said. ``But we didn't want to encourage ideas of the future that are scientifically inaccurate and implausible.

``We're trying to say: Take responsibility for the future. What you do, matters. "