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PACIFIC BALLROOM AT THE LONG BEACH ARENA

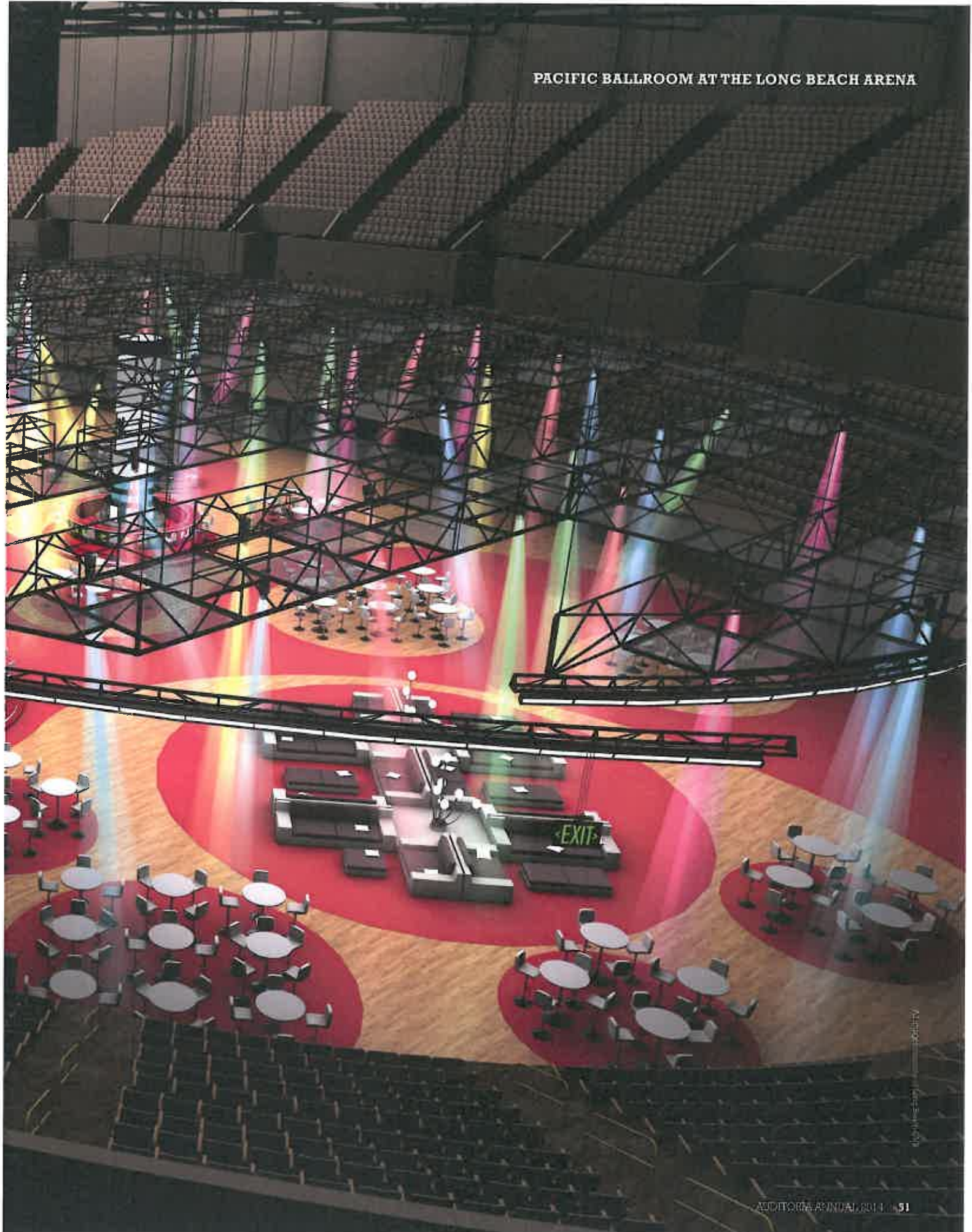
ROMAN LURBY

LONG BEACH *Arena*

Blank Canvas

US\$7m has been spent ingeniously at the 51-year-old Long Beach Arena, giving it the flexibility to morph from a venue to host a 500-guest wedding reception to a 13,000-capacity boxing match – and whatever clients wish for in between

PACIFIC BALLROOM AT THE LONG BEACH ARENA



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW SHAW

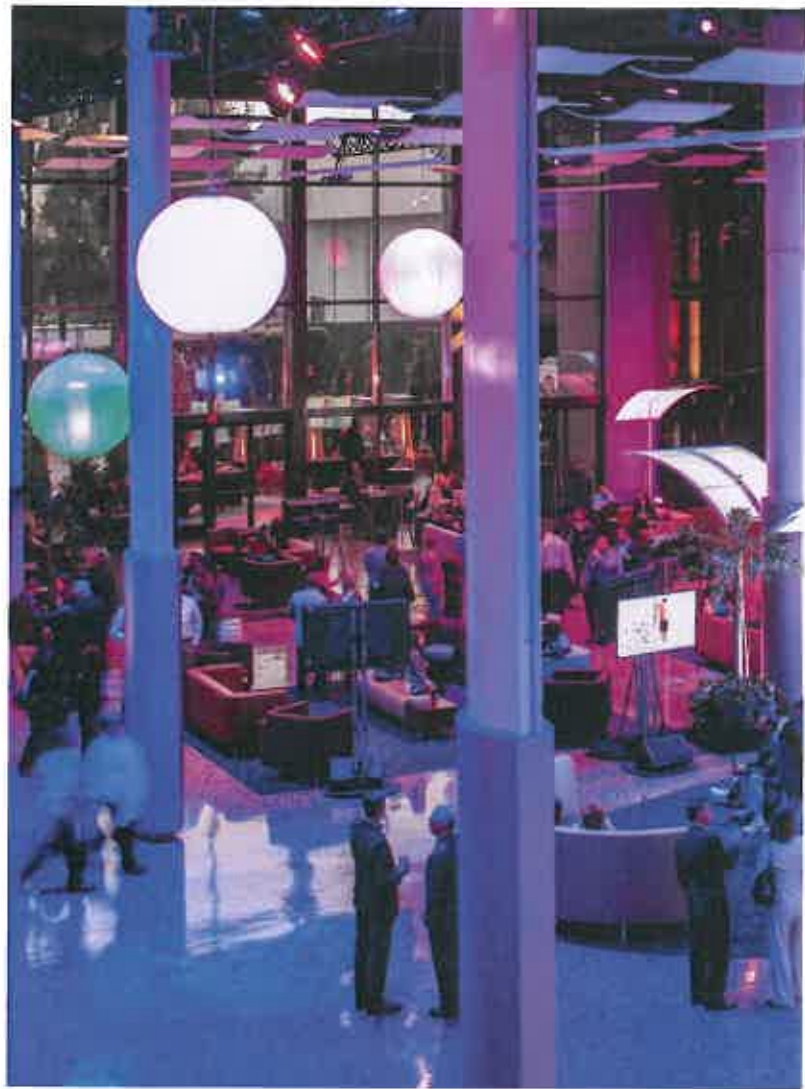
PACIFIC BALLROOM AT THE LONG BEACH ARENA

When Long Beach Arena opened in 1962, John F Kennedy was in the White House and The Beatles were scarcely known outside of Liverpool and Hamburg. But as popular culture exploded over the ensuing decades, the venue played host to some of the genre's biggest stars, from rockers such as Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones, the Eagles and the Red Hot Chili Peppers to rap acts such as Run-D.M.C. and the Beastie Boys. Sporting events have been a mainstay, too, from Los Angeles Kings hockey in the 1960s to Olympic volleyball in 1984, not forgetting the early rounds of the National Collegiate Athletic Association men's basketball tournament back in 1986.

Throughout that time, the business model of small arenas has mostly remained unchanged – a mix of concerts, travelling shows and sporting events. Yet part of what has helped the now 51-year-old Long Beach Arena remain viable as a business was the synergy of having adjacent conference facilities, including 34 meeting rooms, a grand ballroom, three exhibition halls and two small theatres that augment the arena itself.

More recently, traditional revenue streams have been depleted due to newer competing facilities, so the aim of a recent US\$7m interior renovation was partly to increase its flexibility, as well as to enable it to compete for much smaller

The essence of the refurb project was to transform the arena into a multipurpose loft ballroom space that creates a unique theatrical environment



HOME IMPROVEMENTS

The renovation and re-imagining of the Pacific Ballroom at the Long Beach Arena come as many other local landmarks are undergoing improvements. After much of its downtown fell into disrepair in the 1960s, a host of revitalisation campaigns have again made the city within a city (Los Angeles) a destination of its own, starting in the 1980s with the area's first high-rise hotel, the Hyatt Regency.

In the 2000s, the Metropolitan Transit Authority began operation of its first light-rail train, the Blue Line, which linked Long Beach to Los Angeles. More recently, in 2012, Long Beach Airport completed a US\$140m renovation and modernisation, including new passenger lounges with upgraded amenities and a renovation of its historic art deco terminal, which also included outdoor seating areas. "You can sit outside next to fire pits with wine and sushi bars," says Charles Beirne. "It was that kind of thinking about the customer experience that inspired some of the changes we undertook at the Long Beach Arena."

Those changes were lauded in November 2013, when more than 1,300 guests attended the opening of the new space. Called 'Sky Transformation', a section of the arena's curtains disappeared seamlessly for a 'big reveal', doubling the floor space by nearly 50%.



“Our goal has been to repurpose the facility into a venue that would be much more competitive in the tradeshow and convention market”

Charles Beirne

PACIFIC BALLROOM AT THE LONG BEACH ARENA



(Main and left) **Millions of dollars have been invested to redesign all spaces, with new furnishings, lighting and sound systems**

ALL IN YOUR IMAGINATION

“We’ve never seen anything like this before,” enthuses Michael Ferguson, principal at Theatre Projects Consultants, when asked about his firm’s involvement. “It’s a first of its kind in the USA; it’s dynamic, it’s very cool – a blank canvas waiting for somebody to think of a way to use it,” he says. What the team – which includes John Sergio Fisher & Associates, J R Clancy, SMG and Theatre Projects – have created is a technical ceiling and a surrounding curtain wall that can be manipulated to create the sidewalls. “We can breathe new life into an existing space and give it the ability to triple or quadruple its use almost instantly,” Ferguson predicts. “The lights and sound systems are in already – it’s a one-stop shop for events that will be very attractive for the Long Beach Arena’s clients.”

“The truss system enables you to have a third-house, two-thirds-house or a full-house. It’s a very high-tech environment where you’ll be able to change the colour and feel of the space at the touch of a button. This venue will be one of a kind in the world, transformed by colour and by form. It’s really exciting. Its flexibility is unlimited, so it’s just up to your imagination.”

events. Funded through the city’s tidelands oil reserve fund, the refurbishment was finally completed in November 2013. “We’re fortunate that we’re always pretty busy, but we wanted to fill in the midweek market,” reveals Charles Beirne, general manager of the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center, through management company SMG. “Of course we’ll still host the big shows such as *Disney on Ice*, but we’re looking to augment our portfolio with smaller functions. Our goal has been to repurpose the facility into a venue that would be much more competitive in the tradeshow and convention market.”

What that shrewd US\$7m injection offers the Pacific Ballroom at the Long Beach Arena is the capability to morph its spaces to provide for both large and small gatherings. Operators can now create a “room within a room”, according to Jerry Sherman, associate architect, JSA, to facilitate events for 800 to 13,000 people.

“It’s really a layering of the arena,” adds Sherman, who is no stranger to Long Beach himself, having been a member of the team that designed and oversaw the construction of the 10,000-seat swim stadium used for the US

Olympic Swim Trials in 2004. “The industry has changed and Los Angeles has built new venues, so sports is no longer the primary source of income for Long Beach Arena,” he says. The trick for all involved here was to find a way to continue to accommodate sports yet also provide a platform for a much wider variety of events.

Flexibility and intimacy

Continuing on that theme, a bit of technical magic has been conjured up to facilitate a high level of flexibility. The arena features an advanced steel tension-grid system – the largest of its type in the USA and the second largest in the world, featuring eight miles of cable that’s holding up 500,000 lb of steel – created by John Sergio Fisher & Associates (JSFA), the architect of record and theatre consultant on this project. The grid also supports US\$1m worth of LED and stage lighting, sound systems and decorative elements.

“It’s suitable for every type of event at the arena and can be lowered to a height of 30ft,” explains architect John Fisher of JSFA. “No other arena in the world has such a flexible ceiling that moves up and down in this fashion.”



Charles Beirne is confident the Pacific Ballroom at the Long Beach Arena’s newfound flexibility will see the return of A-list artists, professional boxing matches, new conventions and a host of other events

PACIFIC BALLROOM AT THE LONG BEACH ARENA



“We anticipate being able to put a lot more business into not just the building, but into the city because of this” *Iris Himert, executive VP, Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau*

The Planet Ocean mural by environmental artist Wyland wraps around the Long Beach Arena and has been recognised by Guinness World Records as the world's largest of its type

Yet despite its size, the tension-grid system is relatively easy to disassemble and move out of the arena. “We can accommodate events such as boxing and martial arts, but then host much more intimate concerts of 3,000 to 5,000 people,” confirms Beirne. “The grid system gives us the flexibility to make the venue feel very personal.”

With the arena boasting the lighting and sound infrastructure for concerts and theatrical performances, as the ceiling moves down for smaller events it can cater to dinners, receptions and other gatherings with a level of audio-visual capability that traditional convention centres cannot come close to matching. “I’m pretty sure there isn’t another facility in the country that offers such a complete lighting and sound package,” continues JSA’s Sherman.

HUB OF ACTIVITY

Over the past three years, the broader Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center – which includes Long Beach Arena – has also undergone a US\$35m renovation. Improvements include enhanced lobbies and public areas, new chandeliers and custom seating pods, a newly landscaped plaza with a new palm tree tropical garden, upgraded VIP rooms and the replacement of all 3,000 seats in the Terrace Theater. Overall, the centre offers more than 400,000ft² of meeting and exhibit spaces. “Besides Long Beach Arena, there is a convention centre and a performing arts theatre – all under one roof,” reveals SMG’s Dan Lee, assistant general manager, Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center. “There are lots of hotels nearby, too, as well as a park that can host events. This renovation is going to expand the arena beyond its own limits. With this flexibility and creativity, we can make things happen that other venues cannot.”

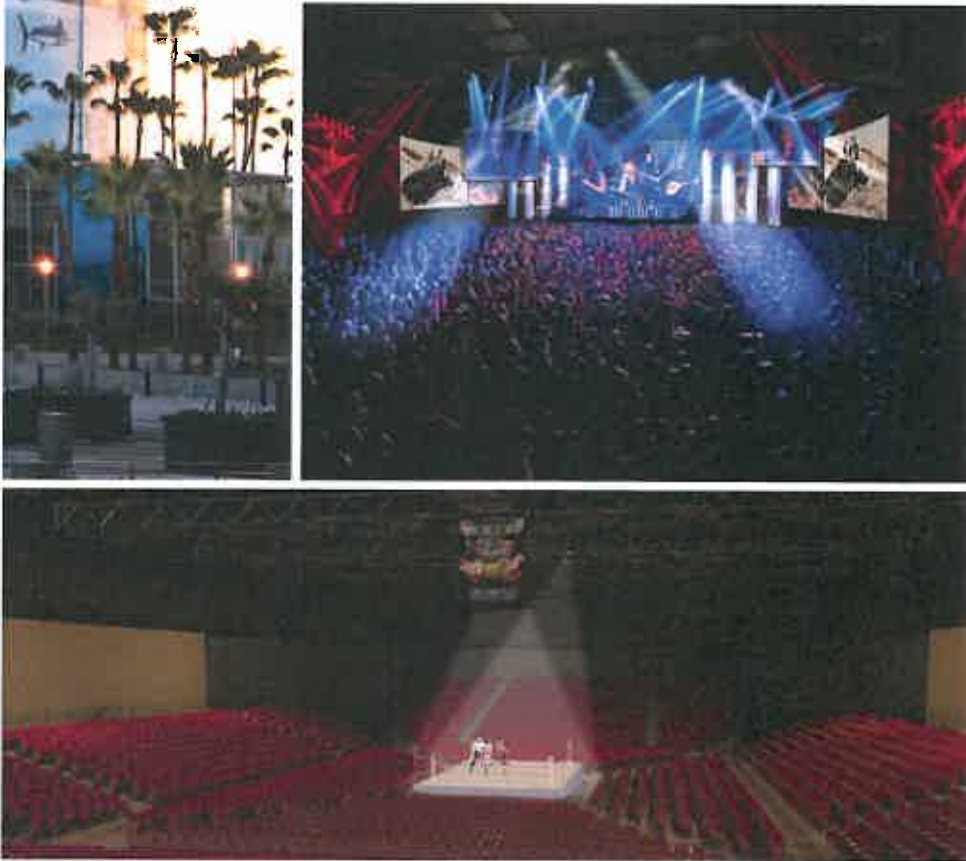
Electronically controlled curtains also drop from the ceiling, enabling the floor area to be encircled, with arena-level sound and lighting. “This is the icing on the cake,” Fisher says. “A traditional ballroom can now be divided into pre-event and performance spaces in one and I don’t know of any other arena of this type that can achieve that.”

Furthermore, the tension grid is proving to be the ideal solution for the illumination which – with 180 pinpoint lights – can light up the entire space or direct light to a single glass (or speaker) at a given spot anywhere on the floor. “It is very flexible,” Fisher adds. “The team can walk on the grid and lights shine through it – all the while it’s invisible to the audience.” Speakers can also be positioned and moved to anywhere on the grid.

“All venues and auditoria are trying to become more flexible, to host more events of different sizes, in order to keep them busy and in the black,” Fisher suggests. “There has been a lot of movement in this direction in the past five years as economies have struggled.”

“Having that flexibility to accommodate these differently scaled programmes all under one roof is tremendous,” enthuses Dan Lee, SMG’s assistant general manager for the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center.

However, to be able to compete realistically for small events such as banquets, meetings and weddings – in addition to larger-scale sports and entertainment events at full-arena capacity – Long Beach Arena also needed a touch of



aesthetic improvement. “It was in really good condition considering its age, but it did look a bit dated,” Lee concedes. “Now, though, it feels as if the venue has had a proper facelift. I would say the environment feels less institutional – it’s more like a lounge than an arena.”

This is most evident in the lobby area, which itself has been subject to a makeover. Waveform lighting trusses have been installed on the three-storey high ceilings, while mid-century-inspired furniture and floor lamps have been placed in moveable seating pod arrangements to create a pre-function area unseen in most modern arenas.

“To have this outer area for cocktail receptions and to get the mood going before events is a trump card,” suggests Iris Himert, executive vice president, Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau. “We anticipate being able to put a lot more business into not just the building, but into the city because of this.”

(Above) **The grid and curtains are the secret to the venue’s flexibility. In this case they are down to create a circa 3,000-seat venue (Top) The 45,000ft², multipurpose event space will have the capability to customise itself to suit any event planner’s palate**

The pride of the lobby’s upgrade is Bogart & Co. – a 350-capacity restaurant, bar and customisable space. It replaces what was once a pirate-themed Captain Morgan’s restaurant, which merely served up grab-and-go food in a rope-and-barrels setting that felt more like amusement park meets frat house than contemporary eatery.

Technical ingenuity

Bogart & Co. and the new lobby space, the Pacific Gallery and Patio, are the perfect complements to the restyled arena, the completion of which has not been without its challenges. The tension grid, as an example, more than tripled the weight of the original system, necessitating structural strengthening to the main trusses of the roof as well as a scaling back of the grid itself. “We originally wanted to cover the whole ceiling,” Fisher reveals. “But instead we have nine rows of tension grids with spaces in between and a walkway in the centre.” The arrangement still provides the same level of flexibility however. Meanwhile the arena’s electrical capacity had to be upgraded to meet modern-day lighting and sound requirements.

One aspect that hasn’t changed is the Planet Ocean mural covering the exterior façade. The 116,000ft² image by Wyland depicts migratory grey whales and other marine life found in the waters off Long Beach, which fits with the arena’s setting – close to the Rainbow Lagoon Park, with the shoreline just across the road to the south.

As pretty as its waterfront setting may be, it is Long Beach Arena’s new paradigm for flexibility that will give this historic venue a chance to remain viable for another half-century. “We needed an edge,” confirms SMG’s Dan Lee. “We now have a number of different facilities within one building. It’s opened up new possibilities and event organisers are already looking at this facility in a whole new light.” The proof? More than US\$20m in new business so far as a direct result of the renovation, plus another US\$40m pending. Quite literally, watch this space... ■

Author

Brian Libby is a Portland, Oregon-based freelance journalist who specialises in the arts and architecture