

## **Better, Stronger, Faster By Kevin King**

### **New and rebuilt convention centers are designed for the next generation of attendees**



Convention centers, new and established, are emerging from the shadow of their former image—that of the big box with dated design and shag-carpet flooring—and are pushing their designs to lure big groups. Whether that's by offering catering service at such places as the Phoenix Convention Center or by incorporating heavy audiovisual components into the building itself, as at the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center, these venues want to be destinations unto themselves. Time to open the box...

In 2008, the International Association of Conference Centers (IACC) commissioned a report to determine the future of meeting spaces, called "IACC Thought Leader Summit: The Future Meeting Experience." The hope then was to kick-start a discussion on the emerging populations and technologies to determine not only how future conference centers should be designed, but more important, for whom they should be designed.

Given population trends, a component of those discussions revolved around attracting Generation Y, the group born from 1980 to 2000 who would be starting to turn 30 by 2011, the age most young professionals begin establishing careers and attending industry events and meetings. Since most convention centers undergo some form of renovation every 15 years, that meant centers built or refurbished by 2008 would need to stay relevant as those in Gen Y hit age 40, in about 2018.

Now, with an economic downturn ending and more funds available to finish bringing convention centers into the 21st century, the panel's dream of conventions with high-tech components, socially friendly design and appeal to young attendees is coming to fruition. Welcome to the future of meetings!

### **One-Stop Shops**



Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center, California

While the preceding decade was all about LEED certification and sustainability with convention center upgrades, the current wave of construction and updates focus on properties becoming all-in-one shops. Gen Y (and other generations, too) want all services and spaces catered for ease of use and versatility. That means less reliance on third parties and more leaning on properties that can deliver all the goods.

The Long Beach Convention Center has been building toward a high-tech refresh. Its arena was built in the 1960s, its conference center was constructed in the 1970s and it expanded in 1994. Despite the slow build, since 2008 the center has been hosting the Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) talks. These annual entrepreneur events often feature speakers from the tech world who advocate for ways to shift the paradigm in how people think about innovation, live and work. After 50 years of such progress, the property is now ready to reemerge in October as the **Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center**.

“We’re completely reinvigorating it,” says Iris Himert, executive vice president at the Long Beach Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. “Before it was just a convention center, but now, when we tell our repeat clients about it, they’re as excited as our salespeople. It has more of a campus feel. You get all of your business done at the center.”

The most significant new feature is a truss system designed by Theatre Projects Consultants and incorporated into the ceiling of the property’s arena. Called the “technical ceiling” by the designers, it will be the United States’ largest tension grid and the Only one that can “fly”—it’s capable of being lowered and raised as needed for the space. It will also have built-in curtains around the edges, so that the space can be contained and turned into a ballroom for a more

intimate setting. Another stunning feature of this redesign will be a system that can light up the entire space or direct light to a single glass (or speaker) at a given spot anywhere on the floor, with 180 pinpoint lights. Even the colors illuminating the event can change with the push of a button. It's like the entire event space has become a high-rise stage. Himert believes the cost savings alone—from not having to outsource to a third party—will be a huge boon to event planners. That's not even scratching the surface on the multitude of other upgrades, including adding an onsite special-event restaurant, Bogart & Co.; providing free Wi-Fi in all public areas; replacing 3,000 seats in the Terrace Theatre; landscaping the Terrace Theatre Plaza and installing a fountain lit with the color of a meeting planner's choosing; and upgrading Green and VIP rooms with new carpeting, lighting and marble countertops.



San Jose McEnergy Convention Center, California

Expansion and renovation at the **San Jose McEnergy Convention Center**, five miles from San Jose International Airport, is undergoing renovations scheduled to be completed in the fall of 2013. The renovations are all about more: more space (125,000 sq. ft. Of new space, totaling 550,000 sq. ft.), more versatility (82,524 sq. ft. Of flex space), more rooms (42 in total), more technology (including its touted ability to webcast and televise event speeches), more eco-friendly (revamps include reclaimed redwood ceilings) and more events (the site will be able to host two major events simultaneously). “Whether it’s a small corporate or a citywide group, San Jose offers the ease of booking the destination as if it were a big-box hotel property,” says Meghan Horrigan, director of communications for Team San Jose. “This saves event planners valuable time, energy and resources, so they can focus on the success of their meeting. And because of our walkable downtown, no transportation is necessary for meetings groups to get from their hotel to the local museums and attractions, restaurants or nightclubs.”



### Metro Toronto Convention Centre, Ontario

Located in the heart of its downtown, the **Metro Toronto Convention Centre (MTCC)** completed most of a three-year \$29 million renovation in January and rearranged the floor space (600,000 sq. ft. in 66 rooms, including two ballrooms) to be more flexible. It also improved the flow of the building with escalators and layout, and included digital signage in each meeting room. Renovations for the kitchen should be done by September. The technology has been improved significantly at MTCC, as it is now one of only two Digital Event Centers in North America to be certified by the Virtual Edge Institute. This certification signifies that the facility's has the network infrastructure, employees and partner ecosystem for planning and executing digital event programs. It's a leader in sustainability as well, winning the Ontario Sustainable Tourism Award in 2012 and diverting 88 percent of its waste from the landfill in 2012.

The **U.S. Cellular Center** in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the largest convention space in eastern Iowa, is scheduled to complete a renovation and expansion project this spring. Between the ballroom's theatrical lighting that syncs to music and changes color and 129,400 sq. ft. of space with seating for 6,900, the \$145.2 million convention complex should easily serve the needs of any and all planners in the Midwest.

Renovations include sprucing up the 267-room convention hotel (a DoubleTree by Hilton) and the hotel's 176,000 sq. ft. of space, adding the Bud Light Lounge and a rooftop restaurant. A 500-plus-space parking lot also is to be added during the project.

### **It's Easier to be Green**



Music City Center, Nashville, Tenn.

While built-in advanced tech components are fast becoming a top priority for new and renovated convention centers, delegates still like their meeting space to be environmentally friendly. Take Nashville's **Music City Center** (MCC): Even before sampling its service and amenities, attendees know the space itself is environmentally sound.

"Nashville's Music City Center is the next generation of convention centers representing the highest in quality, efficiency and sustainability—its most significant element," says Katherine Roberts, Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp.'s public relations coordinator. "A feature key to the building's LEED status is the 360,000-gallon retention tank, which stores runoff water and uses it to irrigate the four-acre green roof and outside landscaping. When meeting in Nashville, groups can rest assured they are being good stewards of the community's resources."

Opened in May, the LEED Silver MCC houses a 70-plus-piece art collection, featuring a light show synced to music. Other standouts include the garden rooftop, with a guitar-shaped design; 55-inch interactive touch screens that will allow visitors to access sound, video and other digital information about the history of Nashville song writing and all 184 members of the Hall of Fame; 350,000 sq. ft.

of space, with a 57,000-square-foot ballroom; and performance-enhanced extras such as additional rigging, lighting and green rooms. MCC is also the new home of the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, an enticement for musically inclined attendees.

The **Wilmington Convention Center**, opened in 2011 in the historic downtown of the North Carolina city bearing its name, also boasts green features. The center was redeveloped from materials at a former industrial railroad yard; uses a sand system to filter rainwater to the Cape Fear River; has special windows to facilitate interior climate control; and uses plumbing that limits its carbon footprint. For planners, the 30,000-square-foot Exhibit Hall, 12,000-square-foot Grand Ballroom and most of the other space includes audiovisual services, wireless Internet and sound systems. Savor provides catering to the facility.



Washington State Convention Center, Seattle

Opened in 2007, with 525,125 gross sq. ft. Of meeting space, **Virginia Beach Convention Center** was the first building in the United States designated LEED Gold certification. With its fastidious focus on conservation and sustainability, it's a beacon for how convention centers can be green and still be effective, gorgeous venues. With views from its 147-foot glass tower and windows that reflect the sky from the outside and allow sunset views from inside, it's an inviting space with an open feel.

Going green is a natural fit for the very ecominded residents of Seattle. During renovations in 2012, the **Washington State Convention Center (WSCC)** turned nearly every changeable surface in its 414,722-square-foot space into some form of recycled materials—including carpets, tiles and walls. It also added an elegant wood-finish look throughout to help create a sense of place.

“The palette was chosen to give a richer, warmer color scheme with more natural finishes, including wood, leather and stone,” says Michael McQuade, director of sales and marketing for WSCC. “That was done to soften the spaces and give guests the feel of a Northwest experience.”

Other major work included a full renovation of all restrooms, new landscaping, new directional signage throughout the property and digital signage in all meeting rooms and public spaces,

where sponsors can place digital ads. Delegates can also expect only locally grown fresh produce for all meals. How's that for green?

### Tapping into the Community



Phoenix Convention Center

Speaking of food, the **Phoenix Convention Center** went a different route with its revamp. When it underwent a \$300 million upgrade in 2008, it went beyond by expanding to 900,000 sq. ft. Of space to bring all things Phoenix and Arizona into the building. The Phoenix Office of Arts and Culture Public Art Program supplies artwork and the center's \$500,000 Innovation Kitchen, which incorporates local cuisine, is utilized by planners behind the scenes. Planners also can arrange for delegates to prepare food in the kitchen.

Other convention centers tap into local culture to give attendees a taste of the city they're visiting. Many fly in the day a meeting starts and out on the day it ends, never exploring what the locale has to offer. So, rather than take delegates to the city, the city comes to them, as in the case at the **New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center**. "New Orleans needed a larger column-free ballroom to stay competitive and the center never had a 'sense of arrival,'" says Tim Hemphill, the center's vice president of sales and marketing. "Both were accomplished by creating the 60,300-square-foot Great Hall and building a new front door with a pedestrian plaza that features a 9-by-45-foot video display board that welcomes our visitors. The Great Hall features a lighting and sound package that rivals any ballroom in our competitive set."

Demand is rising: The center drew some 9 million visitors in 2012, its highest tally since 2004. Its Warehouse District locale offers planners 3,000 hotel rooms. The center debuted its \$52

million renovations and Great Hall in February, bringing its total continuous meeting space up to 1.1 million sq. ft.



Global Center for Health Innovation, Cleveland

Management at the LEED Silver **Cleveland Medical Mart & Convention Center (CCC)** want the venue's local feel to remain intact. With 4,000 hotel rooms within a short drive, the area serves as a foodie hub of sorts—the Food Network regularly covers the city's delectable eats. But it's the adjacent **Global Center for Health Innovation (GCHI)** that should attract groups, according to Tony Prusak, CCC's senior director of sales. Some \$465 million was spent to revamp both projects, so the center, slated to open in June, will be a medical hub with high-quality research and innovations.

"The physical facilities, including both the CCC and the adjacent GCHI, are designed specifically for the exhibitor and attendee, with high-speed wireless connectivity, more than 230,000 sq. ft. Of Class A exhibit hall space, 35 meeting rooms, 17 full truck loading docks and a 32,000-square-foot, column-free grand ballroom with terrific views of Cleveland's lakefront," Prusak says.

The Greater Fort Lauderdale/Broward County Convention Center, which opened last summer, has tantalizing ways of bringing people in the door. More than an event space, it's an art gallery as well. The center has 600,000 sq. ft. Of space plus a cyber cafe that showcases prints and work from such renowned eco-artists as Pascal Lecocq, the "Painter of Blue." The LEED Gold



center sits on 17 acres of waterfront property, and high-tech amenities added in last year's \$34 million renovation include videoconferencing (in the Teleconference Suite) and satellite downlink as well as Wi-Fi hot spots and permanent terminals to plug in laptops and tablets.



Ocean Center, Daytona Beach, Fla.

The **Ocean Center** in Daytona Beach, Fla., also tips its hat to the community, showcasing local art and artists from Volusia County inside. Renovated in 2009, the center features 205,000 sq. ft. Of space, portable staging in a 9,600-seat arena and food service from the award-winning catering service Ovations. And with close proximity to the Daytona International Speedway, meeting planners can plug into locals' favorite sport: NASCAR.

Meeting planners valuing beautiful design should look no further than **Calvin L. Rampton Salt Palace Convention Center** in Salt Lake City. About 225,000 sq. ft. Added in a 2006 renovation brought the total building area to 515,000 sq. ft. But instead of simply adding high-tech and sustainable touches, the Salt Palace went for the wow factor. Roller-coaster designer Kent Seko put his mark on the trusses and building interior, with striking visual elements at the east entrance that make guests feel like they're under a canopy of trees.

Opened in 2008, the \$111 million **Dena'ina Civic and Convention Center** in Anchorage, Alaska, provides views of the Chugach Mountains. The center's open-air design allows light to flow in, and 200,000 sq. ft. Of flex space can accommodate any group wishing to combine a rugged outdoor trip with a striking facility. Wi-Fi is provided throughout, as are custom lighting options and programmable skylight and window-shade controls in select rooms. The banquet and exhibit hall offers 72,240 sq. ft. The building also showcases evocative art and details on the history of the Dena'ina people, the original inhabitants of the region.

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## Resources

- Anaheim/Orange County VCB: [anaheimoc.org](http://anaheimoc.org)
- Atlantic City CVA: [atlanticcitynj.com](http://atlanticcitynj.com)
- Austin Convention Center: [austinconventioncenter.com](http://austinconventioncenter.com)
- Cobb Galleria Centre Atlanta: [cobb Galleria.com](http://cobb Galleria.com)
- Connecticut Convention Center: [ctconventions.com](http://ctconventions.com)
- Destination DC: [washington.org/powerfulprogress](http://washington.org/powerfulprogress)
- Oregon Convention Center: [oregoncc.org](http://oregoncc.org)
- Palm Springs Bureau of Tourism: [visitpalmsprings.com](http://visitpalmsprings.com)
- Team San Jose: [sanjose.org](http://sanjose.org)

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## Centers for the Future



Cobo Center, Detroit

## Centre des Congres de Quebec

- **Will Add:** 69,000 sq. ft. to the current 232,000 sq. ft.
- **New Features:** free high-speed Wi-Fi; acquisition of nearby shopping mall; reconfiguration of meeting space
- **Completion Date:** Winter 2014

### **Cobo Center (Detroit)**

- **Will Add:** 38,000-square-foot ballroom and 30,000-square-foot atrium to current 623,000 sq. ft.
- **New Features:** sustainable additions (solar panels, recycled material, etc.); glass-enclosed exterior walls; upgraded A/V components
- **Completion Date:** 2015

### **Kentucky International Convention Center (Louisville)**

- **Will Add:** retooling of 250,000 sq. ft. (still being discussed)
- **New Features:** state-of-the-art features; adding kitchen, suites, parking, theater and skywalks
- **Completion Date:** TBA (tentative plans: 2015-2020)

### **San Diego Convention Center**

- **Will Add:** 225,000 sq. ft. to current 2.6 million sq. ft.
- **New Features:** five-acre rooftop park/plaza; state-of-the-art tech upgrades
- **Completion Date:** 2016