



# Let There Be Light

Midwest convention centers are **innovating, renovating and working on new builds to provide enhanced visitor experiences** through architectural creativity and strategic design.

**BY DIAN BARBER**

**T**he big-picture aim of convention centers is to heighten the attendee experience and attract more group business. In the U.S. Midwest, the same holds true for destinations such as Detroit and Columbus, Ohio.

Architecture that combines and integrates the natural and digital realities of modern life and its myriad hybridized connections between people revitalizes meeting spaces. Hyper-connectivity within a natural setting extends from its technological capabilities to the local ecosystem surrounding a convention center.

#### **COBO CENTER**

Detroit, ranked No. 1 for business travel in March 2017 by On Call's *Business Travel Productivity Report*, is a city of continuing evolution. Its new light rail, new arena, five new hotels, new restaurants and the US\$279 million, five-year transformation (completed in 2015) of the Cobo Center, set along the Detroit River, has re-invigorated the Motor City.

At the Cobo Center, a massive, futuristic, two-story digital marquee ups the excitement level at the entrance to a transformed event

space now allowing natural light to pour in from 78,000 square feet of glass. Almost a quarter of that glass creates a three-story atrium with a view of Windsor, Canada, across the international waterway. Also incorporating the natural light and view of the river is the 40,000-square-foot Grand Riverview Ballroom.

"I would put our ballroom on par with any ballroom in the world—from a technological standpoint, from an aesthetics standpoint, from a lighting standpoint," says Claude Molinari, general manager of the Cobo Center. "Automatically, it can go from a completely dark space, very closed, like for a theatrical type of event, to wide-open space with all the windows open and 30-foot rolled doors that move silently so then it can be wide open, bathed in sunlight."

A rigid-chain motor lift stage can not only be utilized for reveals, but offers both time and budgetary savings.

"From an operational standpoint, to go from a banquet to a general seating [arrangement], instead of taking 30 trips with all the round tables down the freight elevator, we can load all of the table carts onto that one stage, push a button and bring it all down to storage at once. It saves literally hours of time," Molinari says.



“The Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority has done a spectacular job not only from the standpoint of the aesthetics and the user-friendly things that will work for our customers, but for the operational staff so that we can save money and time—important when you are booking multiple events.”

A \$2 million upgrade completed in December adds to the digital transformation of the Cobo Center. Its technology services department includes an extensive fiber-optic network, Wi-Fi for 32,000 simultaneous users, state-of-the-art digital signage (including wayfinding), satellite uplinks and a broadcast studio. Molinari sees this type of investment in Cobo Center as critical not only for current customers, but also with an eye for attracting more business, such as the rapidly growing esports market.

No convention center is an island; it also coexists with and adds to its surrounding community and greatly contributes to attendee satisfaction for an event.

“We’re selling potential customers on the city as well as the Cobo. People come in and say, ‘Where will we sleep, eat, party and [enjoy] culture, sports and shopping?’”

Molinari says. “And if you can’t say, ‘Right here, right downtown, right around the center,’ you’ll be at a disadvantage.”

The combination of architectural transformation, technology infrastructure improvements, event space flexibility and community integration is already reaping benefits for the Cobo Center. The Society of Automotive Engineers’ WCX17: SAE World Congress Experience in April saw attendance up 16 percent and great attendee satisfaction, so the group has signed up for another nine years at the Cobo. Molinari sees this as a natural outcome: “winning breeds winning.”

### GREATER COLUMBUS (OHIO) CONVENTION CENTER

The Greater Columbus Convention Center is also undergoing its own reimagining. Scheduled to open in July is a \$140 million “door-to-door” renovation of the center, which follows the recently completed \$18 million Goodale Street Parking Facility that showcases local artists and connects to the convention center by a skybridge.

Glass plays a prominent role in this transformed center, with streaming light informing the LEED-certified space throughout, including much of its 10,000 square feet of new meeting areas across 10 rooms, adding more retractable walls that allow for further customization (74 meeting rooms in total) and the addition of 373,000 contiguous square feet of exhibit space (447,000 square feet in total exhibit space). Above the showrooms

are three second-level show manager offices with floor-to-ceiling glass, allowing event staff to survey their kingdom from a unique perspective.

Throughout the center, art also plays among the space with 150 different pieces from local artists placed throughout, each with its own QR code.

Attendee satisfaction has been further enhanced with Wi-Fi upgrades allowing 20,000 simultaneous users and the addition of gathering/collaborative spaces placed throughout the linear center.

Jennifer B. Davis, senior marketing and communications manager for the Greater Columbus Convention Center, says these areas are welcomed by attendees.

“They can see that they are being catered to in that regard, because before and after official sessions, they want little sidebars where they can gather on their own,” she says.

Additional spaces allowing for more informal collaboration and relaxation include the two new food court areas—the South Café & Marketplace (opened in January) and Discovery Café (opened in February), featuring offerings from local purveyors.

Davis sees the local connection with the community at large as of supreme importance for the center’s guests and their overall experience. Within five miles of the Greater Columbus Convention Center are the “High Five” entertainment districts: Short North (Arts District), Arena District, University District, Downtown and German Village. ■



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