

HISPANICTM Meetings & Travel



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The Puerto Rico Convention Center

Maximizing Urban Appeal

Today's Modern
Convention Centers



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Maximizing

Urban

A convention center is, by its very nature, one of the largest and most ambitious projects a community undertakes. Its sheer size and prominence creates cultural and economic opportunities as well as issues of design, function and physical integrations. It profoundly impacts a city's urban life and financial health. Issues surrounding site location, performance, and the ability to weave into the fabric of the city are key factors in its success - or failure. A well-planned convention center is becoming increasingly crucial to destinations competing for worldwide distinction.

Though the modern convention center has evolved significantly from its historic roots in the village marketplace or town square, today's facilities are still based on the core concept of facilitating commerce between exhibitor and attendee while providing a positive economic impact to the local economy.

Regardless of the convenience and low cost of virtual meetings offered via the internet, there is still no substitute for meeting face to face.

BY BEHR CHAMPANA, AIA



Maximizing Appeal

Today's Modern Convention Centers

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Destination Appeal

After the fundamental requirements of facility size, availability and nearby hotel capacity are satisfied, the issue of destination appeal becomes a strong factor in the selection of a meeting or trade-show venue. Locations trying to attract large conventions and increased tourism emphasize unique aspects of a city.

Character of such areas often derives from a dense and vibrant urban development or finely grained historic fabric. When the special qualities of a location are found in urban areas, the city's convention center should be developed nearby to take advantage of these resources.

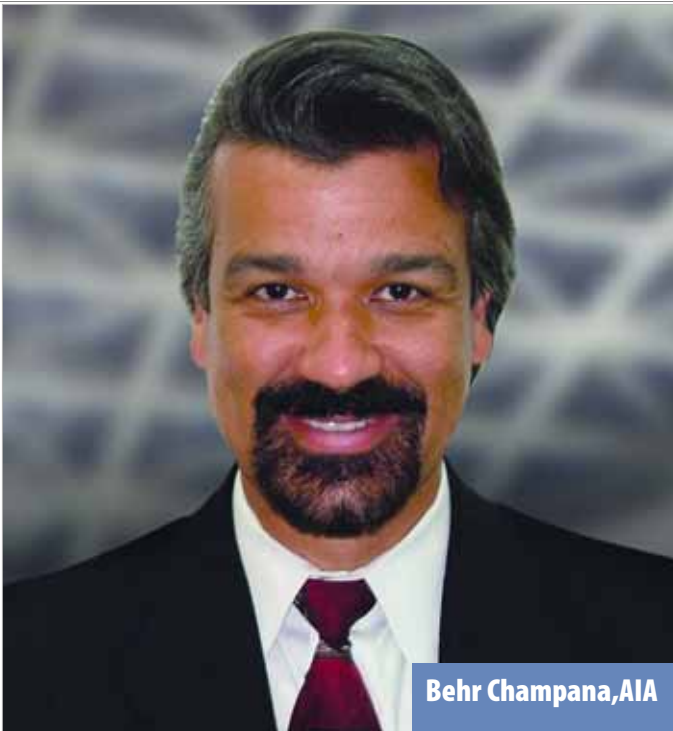
Can the giant footprint of a convention center be successfully integrated into urban areas without destroying the very qualities making the location special? With specialized planning and skillful design, two seemingly contradictory types of development cannot only co-exist but can experience the mutual benefits of economic synergy.

Industry observers indicate that a significant factor event planners use in selecting one location over another is the facility's proximity to amenities and attractions. While the main reason people come to a convention center is the event, the city plays a competitive role based upon its attractiveness as a destination. The urban location has become increasingly advantageous and many projects have successfully capitalized on this trend.

The Pennsylvania Convention Center, for example, is placed on four blocks in the center of a blighted pocket of downtown Philadelphia, two blocks from city hall and adjacent to historic Chinatown. The selected location seemed precarious to some, but the increased population spurred the creation of several new hotels, even in formerly vacant buildings. It has also encouraged new restaurants, inspired retail in the adjacent Chinatown and served as an economic stimulus for enticing people back into the area. Today, an expansion of the facility is in the design phase in an effort to accommodate the increased convention traffic in Philadelphia.

Linking People to Places

Facility placement should encourage and reinforce "pedestrian pathways" bringing visitors and residents to surrounding businesses. Public use of the center and increased attendee population provides economic stimulus for the neighborhoods where convention centers operate.



Behr Champana, AIA

Often, there is great optimism that a convention center can single-handedly revitalize an area of the city. Although existing businesses such as hotel, retail or commercial ventures benefit greatly from the additional customer base, the center only represents a part of what these businesses need to sustain themselves.

San Juan, Puerto Rico's new convention center was planned as the centerpiece of a broad urban planning initiative reclaiming previously unavailable land. The center anchors a new mixed-use district comprised of hotels, office, retail and entertainment facilities and has a strong visual connection to the harbor. With a roof form suggestive of the ocean waves, the center is a distinctive landmark and symbol for Puerto Rico's vision for future development.

Striking a Delicate Balance

Developing a convention center on an urban site means balancing a variety of constraints, individual interests and city requirements. Streets that must remain open, traffic patterns that cannot be altered, historic buildings that must be preserved, even active railroad lines running through the site, are just a few factors to consider.

The new Washington Convention Center in Washington D.C. reflects a design opportunity in an underutilized section of downtown Washington. With nearly 1km of street frontage, this center has transformed six urban blocks previously undeveloped and in desperate need of revitalization. With respect for the scale of its context, its 2.3 million (gross) square feet (230,000m²) of area is partially submerged below grade to reduce its streetscape mass and height. The northern portions of the center further decrease in height and respond to the scale of the adjacent historic neighborhood. By massing the facility as three separate buildings with bridges over streets, the center also respects and maintains the historic street plan for the city and fits comfortably into the surrounding context. As a result of the intelligent land use and unique design, Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback & Associates was awarded both the 2006 Urban Land Institute (ULI) Award of Excellence and the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Honor Award for Architecture.

Urban Rejuvenation

Some cities have a vision of a convention center creating exciting opportunities to connect with culture, architecture and spaces that give a city its character. With imaginative thinking, cities build on existing, previously unused or forgotten plots of land that can accommodate a thriving convention center. Such sites may be on the edge of vital urban areas where the city fabric has been interrupted by natural elements such as rivers, lakes, or man-made elements such as railroads or highways.

The Savannah International Trade and Convention Center, in Savannah, Georgia, is located across the river from the port city on under-utilized Hutchinson Island. However, it is directly opposite the historic district and maintains visual connection to one of the city's main attractions - the River Street tourist district. This site keeps the facility close to the city, accessible via water taxi across the Savannah River, and enhances the quality of the "river city" experience.

Looking to the Future

A community's desire to build a convention center is often a symbol of its hope and vision for the future. Where frequently there is a desire to minimize the visual impact of the building, sometimes it is seen as a symbol of what the city can become.

To aid in the proper site selection, formation and maintenance of convention centers throughout Latin America, the ISMI Foundation (International Foundation Standardization for the Meeting Industry) has been formed. Members of ISMI aim to promote the creation, application and adoption of the best international practices and standards in the meeting industry in Latin America. Group members believe that by developing the capacity to investigate, guide, train and support the Latin American Meetings and Events Industry, communities will be better equipped to create and apply standards and, in doing so, insure top performance and competitiveness of their facilities.

By bringing together the best facility managers, architects, interior designers, journalists and tourism experts, ISMI hopes to make Latin American cities and countries more competitive in the international meetings and trade show arena. This region has so much to offer regarding history, natural surroundings and vibrant urban communities it is now necessary to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of certain areas and capitalize on the possibilities. Very few Latin American facilities are considered top destinations among meeting planners. However, with the proper research, information, training and execution, this too can change.

City leaders are growing increasingly aware of the fundamental role a convention center can play in transforming urban areas and fueling a local economy. To be an instrument of economic stimulus in the world's cities, convention centers must integrate as comfortably as the town square, a cafe or a theatre. They must combine many disparate uses in a synergistic relationship that benefits everyone. They must express the vision of city leaders. It is a challenge for all involved, but one that can bring added value to the city as a home and as a destination.

Behr Champana has more than 23 years of experience in the areas of master planning and site analysis, architectural design, programming, construction documents and administration, and business development. He serves as Vice President and a Principal of TVS International and spends his time at TVS headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia and in the branch office in Dubai, UAE.