



At the International Convention Centre Wales, flexibility is key.

Future-Ready Convention Centers

THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO
HONE THE CUTTING EDGE

By Matt Alderton



The redone Kentucky International Convention Center is in the race.

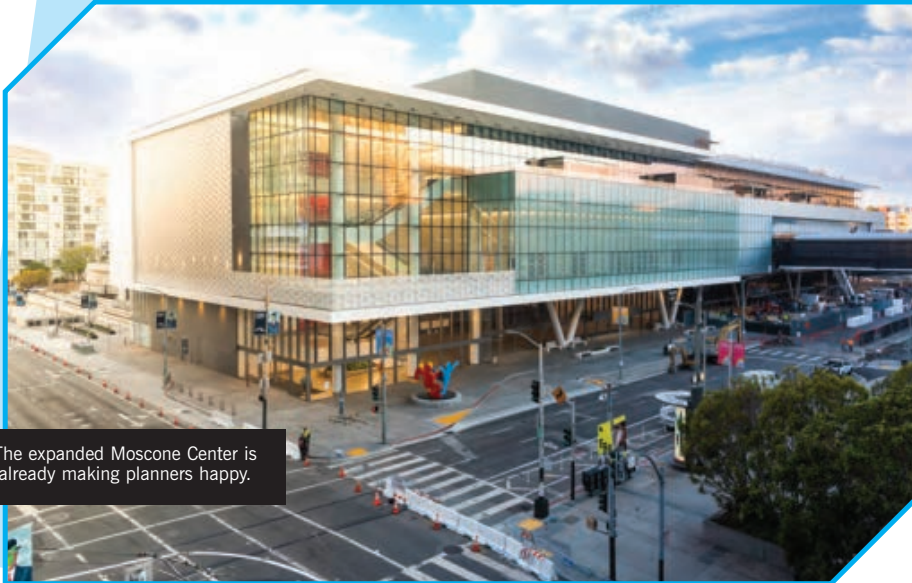
The vision of the Specialty Food Association is to “Shape the Future of Food.” To pull this off, its artisan and purveyor members need contemporary appliances, trusted equipment and innovative ingredients. But neither a slick commercial range nor great Japanese knives are enough to make these member companies thrive. For more than 18,000 annual attendees, the place to learn how to turn a delicious idea into a sustainable business is the Winter Fancy Food Show, which has taken place at San Francisco’s Moscone Center for more than 40 years.

Although the facility had always been serviceable, gathering there had become like cooking in an outdated kitchen: The food was delicious, but making it was a lot more difficult than it should have been. So when Moscone Center completed a \$551 million expansion and renovation in December 2018, the group rejoiced.

“The Winter Fancy Food Show has seen tremendous growth that had us busting at the seams,” says Bill Lynch, vice president of engagement and events at the association, whose 2019 Winter Fancy Food Show in January was the first event to unfurl inside

the new-and-improved Moscone. “The new space allowed us to break all previous records for exhibits.”

But the facility wasn’t just bigger; thanks to new flexible meeting spaces, it was much better. “The new multi-use spaces in the building provided us with opportunities to create deeper engaging experiences around food tasting, trends, culture and education,” notes Lynch, who was especially pleased by the single hall of about 520,000 square feet made from two former underground exhibit areas. “Having the contiguous space connecting the North and South buildings under



The expanded Moscone Center is already making planners happy.

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— Bill Lynch, vice president of engagement and events, Specialty Food Association

Howard Street was a huge deal for us, and that new space became the hottest-selling exhibit space for next year’s show. We walked away from this year’s show with more demand for participation than we have had in the history of the Winter Fancy Food Show.”

Bringing the convention center into the 21st century is paying off already for San Francisco. Read on for how the future is now for Moscone and four other centers that are newly opened, renovated or expanded, each designed to fuel the changing world of meetings.

Moscone Center (San Francisco)

When the city embarked on its expansion and renovation of Moscone in 2014, the center’s location near Silicon Valley dictated that major focus be given to upgrading the technology infrastructure. The project

concluded this past December, and today the facility has a wireless network that can support as many as 60,000 mobile devices, along with six LED displays and dozens of LCD screens near meeting room corridors that can show messages, agendas and sponsor logos; and two high-definition 4K LED screens that hug the corners of the lobby in Moscone South, creating L-shaped media surfaces through which groups can engage in visual storytelling.

But technology tells only part of the story, according to Joe D’Alessandro, San Francisco Travel Association president and CEO, who says changeable spaces are the future. “We talked to a whole bunch of users and potential users of the building, and what we found was that no two wanted to use it the same way,” he says. “The outcome was a building that is extremely flexible.”

As the Specialty Food Association dis-

covered, two underground exhibit halls have become a contiguous space; on top is a new building with breakout rooms and a nearly 50,000-square-foot ballroom. Between Moscone’s three buildings, there are now 120 meetings rooms, up from 107.

To provide attendees with more fresh air, designers created 25,000 square feet of secure outdoor terraces. And when they can’t be outside, participants can see outside, thanks to a giant glass-curtain wall. The natural light provides a pick-me-up while city views remind attendees of where they are.

“When they’re at Moscone Center, we want people to feel like they’re in San Francisco,” says D’Alessandro, who adds that new public art installations add to the sense of place.

If Moscone’s views and art don’t make groups feel like they’re in the City by the Bay, its sustainability will: Designed to LEED Platinum standards, Moscone is set up to recover and recycle 15 million gallons of water a year, compost food waste and generate 20 percent of its own electricity via San Francisco’s largest solar array.

Kentucky International Convention Center (Louisville)

Having hosted the Kentucky Derby since 1875, Louisville has seen its share of races. One that the city has been losing in recent years, though, was the competition for conventions, bookings for which were going to other cities with newer, larger meeting venues. To jockey ahead of the pack, Louisville decided to update its downtown convention facility, the 39-year-old Kentucky International Convention Center. In 2016, operator Kentucky Venues closed the place for a \$207 million expansion and renovation, an effort that was completed last August.

The project included a significant upgrade to the center’s wireless infrastructure: Kentucky Venues spent more than \$1 mil-

lion installing a new network with more than 330 high-density wireless access points. Also added was a dose of trendy local flavor.

“We offer a nice complement of Kentucky-themed design elements,” says general manager Stacy Church, referencing aesthetic touches like wood accents that are reminiscent of the bourbon barrels that populate Kentucky’s famous distilleries.

Perhaps the most dramatic highlight of the renovation is the center’s transformed lighting system. “Prior to the renovation, the lower level felt very dark, like you were underground,” says Church. “Our new design is very modern and very open, thanks to large windows and skylights.”

And speaking of light: The venue’s ballroom now features color-changing LED walls that can be configured to display a company logo, a themed backdrop like the beach or simply a mood-setting ombré.

“We’ve had lots of folks locally reach out to ask about our lighting system because they’re interested in doing something similar,” Church notes. “When that happens, you know you’ve done something right.”

Also getting good reviews, says Church, is the center’s new partnership with the state-based Maker’s Mark Distillery to create and serve a private-select bourbon.

Miami Beach Convention Center

The future of meetings in Miami Beach looks similar to that in Louisville and San Francisco: When a \$620 million renovation and expansion was unveiled in fall 2018, the Miami Beach Convention Center promised increased connectivity, flexibility, sustainability and culture.

Connectivity comes courtesy of nearly 400 new permanent wireless access points that can support up to 64,000 mobile devices simultaneously.

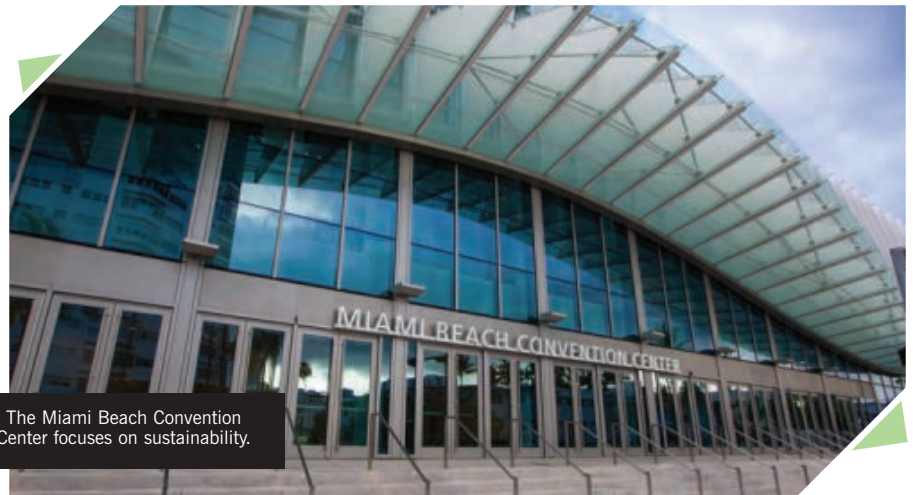
Flexibility arrives in the form of seven new breakout rooms and 62,000 square feet

of new ballroom space, which will help the MBCC accommodate groups of all sizes.

Perhaps the greatest improvement at the facility comes in the form of its sustainable practices, according to Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau president and CEO William D. Talbert III. “One of the development’s most impactful contributions will be the significant landscaping surrounding the convention center,” he says. “Providing beautiful green space for conven-

worth of new public art, connects the center with the destination around it.

“The newly reimagined Miami Beach Convention Center is more than just a building — it’s a sense of place,” Talbert says. “Located just two blocks from the ocean and world-renowned hotels, dining and attractions, the center brings together a surrounding community of local partners that all contribute to the MBCC district,” he notes, adding that the cherry on top will



The Miami Beach Convention Center focuses on sustainability.

tion attendees and locals alike, six new acres of trees and greenery will also aid in cooling the area and improving air quality, and will replace more than six acres of asphalt.”

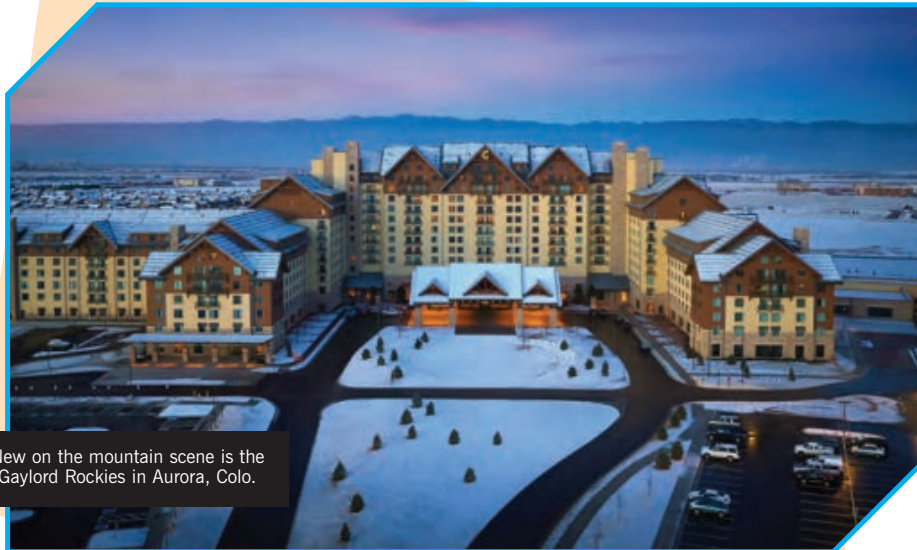
Of the building’s signature design element — dramatic fin-like structures that decorate the side and entrance — Talbert says, “In addition to being architecturally impactful, these fins will offer shade to smartly reduce heat-load indoors. This fin design plus lighting modifications — including bay lighting to take advantage of natural sunlight, high-efficiency units and LED bulbs — will result in a 20 percent reduction in energy use.”

The fins give the facade an undulating effect that references the nearby Atlantic Ocean. That, plus more than \$7 million

be a privately funded headquarters hotel that voters approved last November; currently undergoing permitting, design and engineering, it’s scheduled to commence construction next year and open in fall 2022. “The 800-room hotel is considered the missing ingredient in the destination’s meetings and convention package,” says Talbert.

Gaylord Rockies Resort & Convention Center (Aurora, Colo.)

Opened in December 2018 near Denver International Airport, the Gaylord Rockies Resort & Convention Center takes the same holistic, turnkey approach to hospitality for which Gaylord is known. As Miami’s Talbert suggested, however, that approach is



New on the mountain scene is the Gaylord Rockies in Aurora, Colo.

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— Michael Kofsky, director of sales and marketing, Gaylord Rockies Resort & Convention Center

no longer the exception; it’s the rule.

“Meeting groups want convenience and personalization,” says Michael Kofsky, director of sales and marketing for the new property, which has more than 485,000 square feet of meeting space, including a 175,000-square-foot exhibit hall, four ballrooms, 78 breakout rooms and three event lawns. “The resort’s ‘everything in one place’ approach means that guests have ample choices in food and beverage with eight dining options, a myriad of entertainment, year-round outdoor and indoor pools, and health-and-wellness facilities, including a dedicated spa menu for groups — all while being only minutes from the airport.” It was a cutting-edge idea when Gaylord pioneered it at Nashville’s Gaylord Opryland in the 1980s and ’90s, and it remains innovative today.

Although attendees don’t have to leave the resort, Kofsky agrees with his peers that they still want to feel connected to what’s

outside. “The center is a great example of regionalism design, a hospitality trend where a sense of place is actually infused into a resort’s core design from the ground up,” he says. “The property’s harmonious blend of Colorado themes can be found throughout — from the tones, hues and materials used to local art and craft brews on tap. Examples include a restored caboose in the Grand Lodge, geode-inspired stonework in the lobby, exclusive Gaylord Rockies beer brewed by Aurora’s award-winning Dry Dock Brewing Co. and sizeable outdoor venue space with unobstructed Rocky Mountain views, perfect for receptions and team-building activities.”

International Convention Centre Wales (Newport, Wales)

Convention center design trends aren’t just national in scope; they’re global, as the United Kingdom’s new International

Convention Centre Wales in the city of Newport will demonstrate when it opens this July. With nearly 300,000 square feet of space, the facility will aim to offer planners a nimble floor plan such as those found in the newest centers in the United States.

“Flexibility is a major factor for event planners and something we’ve worked hard to incorporate,” says convention center director Nancy Mollett. “Many spaces are divisible, including the Main Hall. There also is an abundance of different options for breakout and networking areas.”

The need for fresh air and natural light was built into the project, as well. “ICC Wales is set within ancient woodland, and we’ve made the most of this natural asset by ensuring that this peaceful view is accessible from as much of the venue as possible,” Mollett says. “All our meeting rooms have floor-to-ceiling windows with presenter-controlled blackout blinds, and even the Main Hall has natural daylight. We know that access to nature has a whole host of benefits for our physical and mental well-being, so there is direct bridge access from the first floor of the center into the woodland with seating areas, and ‘ponder pods’ where delegates can stretch their legs.”

ICC Wales officials have a vision for meal planning. “Food is increasingly a central aspect of event planning,” notes Mollett. “The current trend is for grazing stations and street-food-style menus, rather than formal sit-down dinners, so the center is fully equipped with a variety of mobile trailers, street stalls and portable bars, which means that anything can be offered without needing to rent costly equipment.”

Ultimately, no one feature makes a convention center cutting-edge. Instead of an attribute, these five facilities suggest, it’s an ethos. “Facilities have always been important,” says Mollett. “But more and more focus during the design stage is now on the customer journey and experience.” ■