

TRENDS: THE NEW WAVE IN CONFERENCE CENTRE DESIGN

IT HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY BENEFICIAL FOR ORGANIZATIONS OF ALL KINDS TO INVEST IN THEIR OWN CONFERENCE AND TRAINING CENTRES. MOST CONFERENCE CENTRES RESPOND TO A FAIRLY TYPICAL SET OF REQUIREMENTS AND CONSTRAINTS: LOCATION WITHIN OR IN PROXIMITY TO THE CLIENT'S OFFICES, FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY TO VARYING FUNCTIONS, SOPHISTICATED TECHNOLOGIES, AND A VARIETY OF AMENITIES. TEXT ANIK JHAVERI, AIA AND YVES SPRINGUEL, AIA (AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS)



In the last two years, however, we have dealt with some new developments influencing decisions about and design solutions for conference centres.

- + Sustainability is now both a core value and economic necessity for nearly every organization, but energy efficiency is a particular challenge for conference centres.
- + Adaptive re-use is often an attractive option, especially given the availability of urban retail properties, with their higher overall ceiling heights and proximity to hotels and restaurants.
- + Technology and its uses are changing, as organizations adopt more timely, inclusive, and geographically unfettered ways to reach their constituencies and the public.
- + Branding and privacy are critical to enabling conference centre owners to make their facilities available to outside organisations.

Each of these opportunities has significant implications for the location and design of conference centres, of course. Four recent Washington, D.C.-area projects offer interesting examples of the issues and successful ways to address them.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY

The focus on sustainability in the design, construction, and operation of buildings and facilities is growing more intense. Energy efficiency is especially critical for conference centres with their typically large volumes of space and great variation in numbers of occupants. Engineers have generally had to design for the worst case.

For the Council on Foreign Relations, maximizing energy efficiency in the new Washington, D.C. conference centre was prudent, and a demonstration of the organization's commitment to sustainability. To meet these objectives, we adopted 'demand controlled ventilation', installing a system of CO₂ monitors that determines the need for air changes on conference floors. Whereas, without the sensors, the system would be

conservative, demanding a higher level of ventilation at all times, this approach allows greater levels of ventilation when the space is fully occupied and code minimums when it is not. Monthly monitoring and analysis of the electrical load data and comparison of the actual operations with the design intent will reveal further opportunities for efficiency.

Other significant contributors to the building's energy savings and sustainability include a new, high-performance glass curtain wall; modifications to the existing exterior skin assembly for infiltration and vapor control; a continuous dimming system for all light fixtures within 15 ft. of the building

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perimeter; and green power offsets. These measures have earned the Council's building the EPA designation 'Designed to Earn the ENERGY STAR', placing it within the top 25% of energy efficient buildings.

ADAPTIVE REUSE

One of the unsung heroes of sustainability is adaptive reuse - green on a grand scale. As compared with new construction, it is faster to market, has a lower cost, and revitalizes the urban fabric while preserving important aspects of local architectural character. Adaptive reuse also creates unique opportunities for creative design solutions.

For a financial services client, conserving resources meant taking an existing urban building and using its framework to re-cast the retail space - a defunct movie

theater - for a new purpose. Capitalizing on the large volumes and sloping floors, we created a flexible, highly functional venue for a variety of meeting types. By removing a mezzanine level, thus expanding the ceiling heights to 15 to 35 ft., and designing accent walls of blue light, we created the effect of a terraced outdoor square. The striking rhythm of undulating ceiling panels highlights the impressive scale of the conference centre and draws visitors through the space.

TECHNOLOGY

Though video conferencing still enjoys popularity, new technologies and media - Podcasts and YouTube, for instance - are

disseminating conference proceedings far beyond the physical space and attendees. As a consequence, conference centre design now must take into account on-screen effects and different acoustic requirements.

Because broadcast capabilities are critical for the Council on Foreign Relations, the design of the new 200-seat meeting room incorporates lighting, acoustics, backdrops, and furniture specifically suited to a broadcast-ready set. The lighting combines ambient fluorescent fixtures and halogen 'stage lighting' fixtures, linked in a system of individual motorized controls and preset 'scenarios' determined by the size and nature of the event. Appropriate acoustic performance was ensured by covering walls with absorptive fabric panels and backing the ceiling tiles with gypsum board. For our financial client and for Capital One,



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for which we designed a major conference facility, we also took into account the location and function of the control room, audio/video recording rooms, and translation booths.

BRANDING AND PRIVACY

Many organisations are adding to the functionality of their conference centres by making the facilities available to outside groups. To make that objective viable, the conference centres must meet two criteria: visual independence - a clear, compelling, distinct image; and physical independence - ability to separate public and private space to ensure privacy and security.

At the Capital One headquarters in McLean, Virginia, we gave the new conference centre building its own identity, clearly defined entrances, and separate access to and from the headquarters. Its form expresses the curvature of the 450-person amphitheatre on the outside, while the glass curtain wall at the conference centre entrance allows visitors to see into the atrium from the outside. The public zone of the building has a visual draw from the exterior, and the feature staircase cascading prominently across the front of the atrium highlights the activity and circulation. Inside, the palette of finishes is a collection of rich complex neutrals, with a natural wood veneer provid-

ing the primary accent. The design marries influences from the hospitality sector with those from the corporate sector, making the space both professional and warmly inviting.

The conference centre for the law firm of Morrison & Foerster LLP, too, has an explicit brand. But here, privacy and security were critical, as the conference facilities are located adjacent to the offices of the firm. The solution spreads the conference centre over four floors, of which the upper two can be made available to the public, while the lower two are reserved for in-house working sessions. In the public conference space, the floors are connected by a sculptural feature staircase, enabling its simultaneous use by two groups. Public and private floors are isolated from each other with a secure door and less public stair, and the upper floor facilities are accessed from a dedicated reception area. Secure glass doors divide the conference centre from the attorneys' work zones, creating a sense of openness and continuity as well as ensuring restricted access. Like the other three, Morrison & Foerster's conference centre has a separate entrance from the secure garage, and touch down private offices in lieu of VIP rooms, giving speakers the privacy and amenity as desired.

In difficult economic times, this new wave of conference centres has great potential for organizations and architects alike: our clients gain from the tangible and intangible benefits of energy efficiency, sustainability, and public access; and we have the opportunity to demonstrate the great value of thoughtful, innovative design.

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