

March 2017

Tech and science enhance Greater Seattle meetings

by Maria Lenhart



Bell Harbor International Conference Center, Seattle

It was indeed prophetic that the 1962 World's Fair, which celebrated the Space Age by unveiling such wonders as a monorail transit system and the iconic Space Needle, happened in Seattle. As home to Microsoft, Amazon, Boeing and many other innovators, Greater Seattle has proven itself time and again as a welcoming environment for technology, science and engagement.

As such, it only makes sense that the metro area is also a welcoming environment for meetings requiring state-of-the-art tech amenities and learning opportunities for attendees. There is no shortage of meeting facilities and off-site venues that deliver in this regard, according to Robert Hampton, vice president of convention sales and services for Visit Seattle.

"When meeting planners are looking at Seattle, science and technology are top of mind," he said. "We're a hotbed of great tech companies that are either based here or have a big presence here. Seattle has the credibility."

Because Greater Seattle is a major tech hub, hotels and venues are challenged to deliver the kind of amenities that its local corporate clients expect, he added.

"Good technology is an expectation of every customer, but when you have a customer like Microsoft you really have to demonstrate that you value them," Hampton said. "In many cases, our local tech customers have been able to advise those of us in the hospitality industry on what we need to do."

Seattle's wealth of science and technology innovators also makes the city a good source for speakers and presenters at meetings, he said.

"We can provide access to some of the top minds in the country," Hampton said. "Plus, a lot of tech associates who meet here know their attendance will be high."

Seattle

In addition to a major expansion of the Washington State Convention Center (WSCC), expected to break ground this fall and open in 2020, the existing facility recently updated its technological features, significantly boosting its wireless and fiber-optic connectivity. The convention center, which features an extensive art collection, also partnered with STQRY, an app that enables visitors to locate and explore the sculpture, paintings, multimedia and other works on display.

Other tech-forward meeting facilities include the Bell Harbor International Conference Center, an IACC-certified facility that offers 100,000 square feet of meeting and event space in a complex with panoramic views of Elliott Bay, Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains.

When it comes to innovative off-site venues, Seattle Center, originally the site of the 1962 World's Fair, has a stunning array of options that include the Pacific Science Center, Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP), Chihuly Garden and Glass and the Space Needle.

Built as the Fair's U.S. Science Pavilion, the Pacific Science Center retains its stunning Mid-Century exterior of towering arches and reflecting pools, but has been updated with IMAX theaters, hands-on science exhibits, laser light shows, a planetarium and a tropical butterfly aviary. The center can host anything from intimate dinners to lavish events for up to 4,000 guests.

Offering event space at its SkyLine level for up to 350 guests, the Space Needle recently added new digital experiences. Its 520 Teleporter and SkyPad kiosks enable visitors to create personalized digital photos and enjoy virtual experiences around the city, including getting on the field with the NFL's Seattle Seahawks at CenturyLink Field.

Also new is the Space Needle 360 app, which when used with VR headsets enables planners to take virtual tours of Seattle Center's event possibilities. These include the Ultimate Block Party, a multi-venue bash that can accommodate more than 2,500 people when combining MoPOP, the Space Needle and Chihuly Garden and Glass.

Created by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, MoPOP (formerly the Experience Music Project) is filled with interactive exhibits pertaining to rock music, science fiction, fashion and more. Event spaces include Sky Church, which offers a massive video screen for productions and holds up to 500 people.

Recently relocated to the spacious Naval Reserve Building in Lake Union Park, the Museum of History & Industry (MOHAI) has an extensive collection of artifacts and memorabilia, including souvenirs from the World's Fair, neon signs from bygone establishments, maritime objects and products from local businesses.

Endowed by Amazon's CEO Jeff Bezos, MOHAI's Bezos Center for Innovation features lectures, special programs and interactive exhibits pertaining to Seattle's role as a nexus for big ideas and new concepts. MOHAI offers several spaces for private events, including the Grand Atrium, Lakeview Terrace, Lakefront Pavilion and West Patio.

Bellevue

Located just across Lake Washington from Seattle, Bellevue does brisk business midweek with corporate groups, according to Jane Kantor, director of sales for Visit Bellevue Washington. Its main meetings facility, the Meydenbauer Convention Center, recently completed a major renovation that included enhanced network and audiovisual capabilities and other tech upgrades.

"Groups coming here expect to have great technology, so it's very exciting to offer them a new product," Kantor said. "The center was taken down to the studs and both the interior and exterior have been vastly improved."

Tacoma

South of Seattle, Tacoma is another destination that showcases innovation. The city offers midsize meeting and convention groups the chance to take over the city while enjoying a compact downtown with a renowned waterfront museum district just steps away from hotels and the convention center, according to Chelene Potvin-Bird, vice president of sales for Travel Tacoma.

Tacoma's major meetings venue, the Greater Tacoma Convention Center, provides 119,000 square feet of meeting and exhibition space. Construction is expected to start later this year on an adjacent 300-room convention headquarters hotel with a projected opening in summer 2019.

"This is a very welcome development, as we could use more rooms within walking distance of the Center," Potvin-Bird said. "The new hotel will also give us more meeting space, so we'll be able to handle larger groups."

Tacoma offers groups an array of choices for off-site venues, she added.

"Our museums are a huge asset for us—many groups will do an event at America's Car Museum or the Museum of Glass," she said. "People love going to the Museum of Glass, where they get the chance to blow their own glass objects."

One of the region's premier attractions, the Museum of Glass is an architectural landmark on the city's revitalized waterfront. Its massive 90-foot stainless steel cone features the world's largest Hot Shop Amphitheater where visitors can see glass artists at work, transforming piles of broken glass into sculptural objects.

The museum also features galleries of glass art, including works by Tacoma native son Dale Chihuly, and an Education Studio where visitors can create their own glass art.

Tacoma's newest venue, America's Car Museum, is a nine-acre complex that features not only vintage cars but an education center, library and exhibits exploring how the automobile has played a distinctive role in shaping American society. Groups of up to 500 can gather in spacious galleries overlooking downtown Tacoma or in more intimate spaces that include a club lounge. The 3.5-acre Haub Family Field is available for car shows, concerts, festivals and other events.

Another asset for groups is the University of Washington Tacoma, a 46-acre campus adjacent to the museum district. The university has facilities equipped for sophisticated video and data presentations, including conference rooms and computer labs.

“The university has some great spaces for events and is located right in the heart of downtown,” Potvin-Bird said. “In particular, they have really helped us with the education meetings market.”

Seattle Southside

Located between Seattle and Tacoma, and the home of Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, the region known as Seattle Southside encompasses Tukwila, Des Moines and SeaTac.

Southside’s major attraction is the Museum of Flight, the largest independent nonprofit air and space museum in the world, featuring over 175 aircraft and spacecraft and tens of thousands of artifacts chronicling aviation history.

Many of these artifacts are housed in the Red Barn, the original Boeing Company factory. Last year the museum unveiled the \$22 million Aviation Pavilion, an open-air structure the length of two football fields that exhibits more than 20 commercial and military aircraft, many of which visitors can walk through.

The museum offers special tours and interactive experiences that can be arranged for groups. Features include the Personal Courage Wing, a 58,000-square-foot space filled with aircraft from World War II.

Snohomish County

North of Seattle, Snohomish County serves groups in the 300 to 350 range at such venues as the Edward D. Hansen Conference Center at XFINITY Arena in Everett and the Lynnwood Convention Center in Lynnwood.

The county’s major meetings property is Tulalip Resort & Casino, which offers 30,000 square feet of meeting space, including a 15,000-square-foot ballroom and a 450-seat theater. The resort recently completed a \$15 million renovation that featured a tech update for all 370 guest rooms.

Located in Mukilteo, the Future of Flight Aviation Center & Boeing Tour sits across from Boeing’s largest jet assembly plant. Interactive exhibits on commercial aviation include a flight simulator and an airplane design program where visitors can design an aircraft and have its airworthiness tested by computer.

Event spaces include the Strato Deck, where guests can watch aircraft taking off and landing on the airfield. Tours of the nearby Boeing plant are also available.