

Urban Land



THOMPSON VENTULETT STANBACK & ASSOCIATES (TVA)

unconventional

TERRY J. LASSAR

the number of new and expanded convention centers is exploding across the country. New York City is doubling the size of the Jacob Javits Convention Center. Chicago's McCormick Place—one of the largest of its kind in the world and growing to nearly 3 million square feet when completed in 2008—never stops expanding. In this fiercely competitive industry, convention center authorities are continually looking for ways to distinguish their facilities.

Both the Pennsylvania Convention Center (PCC) in Philadelphia, which opened in 1994, and the Washington, D.C., Convention Center, which opened last year, use their art collections to market their facilities and make them distinct from others. The art at these two centers is also intended to draw some of the same crowd that visits the world-class art museums in both these cities, a strategy that is working. In much the same way that airports with high-quality retail space draw a percentage of visitors who travel there just to shop, so are these two convention centers drawing people making special trips solely to view the art.

Some 150 public art tours a year are scheduled at the PCC, and more than 15 requests a week are received for tours of the center's collection. A brochure on the new Washington Convention Center emphasizes the facility's full-scale exhibit halls, array of meeting rooms, spacious ballroom, and technological advances. At the same time, the brochure notes, "we wanted to offer our guests more, something that was uniquely personal, and we found our solution in art." Lewis H. Dawley III, former Washington Convention Center Authority (WCCA) general manager and chief executive, describes the art program as a "major selling point for us and an added benefit for meeting planners and clients." The art program also "serves as a catalyst for our visitors to get out and explore the other museums and attractions in Washington's diverse neighborhoods," he says.

During construction of the convention center in downtown Philadelphia—which incorporated the renovated 1893 Reading Terminal train shed, market, and head house—an art curator was hired to work with an art consultant to assemble what was then one of the country's largest public art collections not located in a museum.

A new crop of convention centers is connecting with the surrounding community through art.

Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #1103*, a curved, painted mural wrapping around a nearly 50-foot-high, two-level staircase, was designed as a landmark that visitors can spot from the lobby entrance to the Washington, D.C., Convention Center.

art spaces



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Five Easy Pieces by Donald Lipski, which hangs in the 2.3 million-square-foot Washington Convention Center, is a collection of large-scale geometric shapes made from everyday objects like tennis rackets, kayaks, guitars, bar stools, and bicycles.

Budgets for these public art programs often are set by requirements that a certain percentage of the construction budget be set aside for art; in the case of the PCC, the requirement was 1 percent of the budget. However, at Chicago's McCormick Place, where the center operates as an independent public corporation separate from the city, the city's percent-for-art program does not apply.

"It's important to start planning the art program early," advises Tom Ventulett, whose architecture firm Thompson Ventulett Stainback & Associates (TVS) has designed many convention centers, including those in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington. The art program for the 1998 southern expansion of Chicago's McCormick Place, which was funded by savings from the design/build process, came late in the construction phase, giving the art consultant a mere seven months to shape the art collection. Ventulett, who has a deep interest in art and has been an avid collector for more than 25 years, pressed hard for the art program.

When the art program is planned late in the design phase, there usually is not enough time to commission site-specific pieces, and the convention center frequently is limited to acquiring off-the-shelf art from galleries. Chicago-based art consultant Joel Straus warns that if the art program is not planned early in the design phase, the many additional construction changes needed to accommodate the art pieces—such as retrofitting lights, or building exhibit structures or ceiling superstructures to suspend large installations—can increase the art budget by as much as 10 percent, which usually means fewer artworks.

At the Washington facility, which houses the largest public art collection in the city not in a museum, as well as in any convention center, the art program was part of the construction budget. The D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, which managed the \$4 million program, hired Straus to work with an arts committee to create the collection. The committee was formed early in 2000 before the interior design program was developed.

The collection was developed by directors and curators from the city's world-class museums and notable art organizations, including the National Gallery of Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Corcoran Gallery of Art, U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, and D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities. The late Carter Brown, former director of the National Gallery and chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts, was deeply involved in the design of the center and played a key role on the art committee.

As with most high-profile projects in Washington, the art selection process for the new convention center was complicated and highly political, which Straus views as a good thing. "Large-scale public art programs are all about representing the larger public interest, and the core political dialogue that is inherent in the selec-



Capital Stars, a suspended sculpture in the Washington Convention Center by Larry Kirkland, blends geography, history, and politics; Washington, D.C., in the center, is the nation's political epicenter, but it stands alone, without a state.

tion process is an extraordinarily important aspect of these public art programs," he says.

Judith Stein, former curator at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, who was hired as art curator for the PCC, worked with an art consultant and art committee to assemble the \$2 million art collection, which at that time was the largest in any convention center. Because it was a public art collection, the committee followed some parameters—for example, eschewing blatantly partisan political works and art that showed frontal nudity. "But that doesn't mean we chose the equivalent of Musak," emphasizes Stein.

A primary goal was to reflect the rich ethnic and cultural diversity in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania. To that end, the 57 artists selected represent a variety of experiences: Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinos, among them 21 women—and Pennsylvania residents predominate in the selection. PCC bought 73 artworks and commissioned 19 site-specific installations.

Chinese American sculptor Mei-Ling Hom was commissioned to design *China Wedge*, a 40-foot-long sculpture composed of restaurant crockery—22,000 Chinese cups, bowls, and spoons wedged into a space under an escalator. The sculpture pays homage to Philadelphia's Chinatown, which is adjacent to the convention center. The piece is wedged into the architecture much the way that many Asian Americans pushed themselves into American life through the restaurant business.

Many of the art pieces are easily viewed from outside the building. Unlike the insular design of many convention centers, the Philadelphia center is highly transparent, with large windows opening onto the pedestrian concourses on two sides and glass-enclosed stair towers located at either end.

Diversity also drove the public art program at the Washington center, where more than half the artwork is by area artists. The 72-

foot-long Shaw wall traces the rich history of the Shaw community, the neighborhood next to the center that was the heart of Washington's African American community from the 1890s to the 1950s. An ad hoc committee was formed to collect colorful stories and history about the neighborhood, and five artists were selected from the neighborhood to create the five panels comprising the Shaw wall.

The decision to insert the six-block-long convention center into the middle of the existing historic residential neighborhood was controversial. The collaborative process of engaging members of the community in the art program and soliciting their contributions to an

artwork honoring their history and culture helped build trust among the neighborhood residents and win their support for the new building.

The convention center's cavernous 2.3 million-square-foot interior is further humanized by a diverse array of sculptures, paintings, photographs, graphics, and multimedia works. Many of the larger site-specific artworks double as wayfinding design elements, especially important in a convention center where thousands of people are milling about in huge spaces, many for the first time. People may walk the length of several city blocks before realizing they are headed in the wrong direction. "That's why it's important to carefully shape the volumes and spaces with clear sight lines and vistas so that visitors can readily see where they are going," notes Liz Neiswander, lead TVS interior designer for the center. The architects also incorporated visual design cues, including prominent art pieces, to help orient visitors so they do not have to rely on signs and graphics, which during a bustling trade show can easily disappear behind banners and booths. Most of the larger art pieces are placed at the busiest intersections and in the concourse and entrance areas.

Greeting visitors at the main street entryway at the Washington center is a pair of imposing bronze columns by Washington sculptor Jim Sanborn. In front of the two-story windows on the lower concourse is a star-studded glass sculpture by Larry Kirkland, and floating nearby is Richmond, Virginia-based Kendall Buster's biomorphic assembly of shade cloth and steel form that seems to float in the air.



More than half of the artworks at the Washington Convention Center are by area artists. *Shaw Rhythms*, an oil painting by Rick Freeman, is one of the artworks that make up the 72-foot-long Shaw wall, which traces the rich history of the Shaw community, the neighborhood next to the convention center.

The use of design to orient visitors was especially important at the D.C. center, where to comply with the city's strict height limit, a large part of the building, including a main exhibit hall, was placed below ground level. The architects flooded the building with natural light so that most people do not realize they are underground. The center, which has a three-story circulation route, includes clear vistas and sight lines along the long central axis so visitors can easily see

where they are going. One of the advantages of multilevel centers, notes TVS principal Helen Hatch, is that visitors can communicate visually from one level to another and orient themselves.

One important wayfinding architectural element at the Washington facility is a rounded, two-level stairway, originally designed to be encased in wood and sculpted like a musical instrument. It was intended to serve as a stabilizing focal point at the L Street bridge to direct visitors to the exhibit hall on the upper level, explains Neiswander. "We designed the stair as a memorable landmark that visitors can easily spot from the lobby entry, which is a full city block away." But as budget pressures mounted midway through construction, the convention center authority needed to cut costs and raised the possibility of removing the staircase.

An emergency meeting of the art committee was immediately convened to brainstorm less costly alternatives. One committee member suggested that the spot would be ideal for a monumental wall painting by Sol LeWitt, who, in fact, agreed to create a curved painted mural that would wrap around the nearly 50-foot-high staircase. He did so at a nominal fee, considering his stature and reputation, notes Straus. Much infrastructure work was required in order to accommodate the painting, as well as LeWitt's detailed specifications for the rounded surface, which had to be completely smooth.

Ventulett had worked with LeWitt for many years and was accustomed to his muted palette. "But I was totally unprepared for the bold, iridescent, almost fluorescent rainbow of colors in his *Wall Drawing* at the Washington center," he says. "This was a total sur-

prise. LeWitt, however, has such an extraordinary innate sense of color, that he pulled it off splendidly."

At the Pennsylvania Convention Center, sculptor Judy Pfaff was commissioned to create her kaleidoscopic *Cirque Cirque*, which fills the firmament of the Grand Hall lobby with planet forms and star trains. The 250-foot-long sculpture is one of the largest public art pieces in the United States, according to curator Stein.

The artworks in convention centers are usually monumental pieces that will not get lost in the mammoth interior spaces. But a more recent trend, starting with the PCC, is to highlight smaller pieces as well. The Philadelphia art selection committee wanted to showcase the city's rich, diverse art community by including ceramics, jewelry, photographs, and furniture along with larger murals and sculptures. To accommodate these smaller artworks, TVS modulated the architecture, designing intimate display spaces where these pieces would look best—in niches off concourse areas on the upper level and in glass vitrine cases next to meeting rooms.

Ventulett contends that people generally connect more directly to smaller pieces than to large ones. Most visitors to convention centers are en route to a meeting room or an exhibit hall and barely look up as they whiz by the large suspended artwork, he notes. On the other hand, Ventulett says he has seen people press up to glass exhibit cases, and though they may be talking on their cell phones, they stop to look.

Ventulett is especially interested in opportunities for photographic displays. At the south addition to McCormick Place, where TVS designed a new conference center, hotel, exhibition hall, and meeting rooms, he collaborated with Straus to create a photography gallery. Straus, working with a vocational high school in the Dunbar neighborhood adjacent to the expansion site, gave students point-and-shoot cameras and told them to photograph images describing Chicago from their personal perspective. The images were enlarged, framed, and displayed gallery-style, taking up an entire wall. "I can't tell you the incredible goodwill and community support that is generated from programs like these," notes Straus. Several of the Dunbar student photographers went on to attend art school, he adds.



The Pennsylvania Convention Center contains 73 artworks and 19 site-specific installations. *China Wedge* by sculptress Mei-Ling Hom is a 40-foot-long sculpture composed of restaurant crockery—22,000 Chinese cups, bowls, and spoons—that pays homage to Philadelphia's Chinatown, located adjacent to the convention center.

The art program at the Washington Convention Center was originally planned to be open access, where the public could take self-guided tours. Although the 9/11 attacks changed that concept, the WCCA still wanted the art program to function as a continuing presence in the community and hired Straus Consulting to conduct scheduled tours of the artwork. The Pennsylvania Convention Center sponsored a series of lectures on its artwork, plus brown-bag lunches allow visitors to meet the artists. Art curator Stein conducted the first public tours and later trained staff at the center as art guides.

In contrast to airports, which also are public facilities, convention centers are built primarily to serve commercial interests. However, the newer convention centers embrace their downtowns with inviting, transparent designs that open to the street, blend with their urban surroundings, and include museum-quality art collections for everyone to enjoy. These are true civic spaces and city destinations. ■

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