

THE ART OF SEATTLE

BY CHRIS MCBEATH

A metamorphosis has reshaped this scenic Northwest U.S. town into an exciting cultural hub.

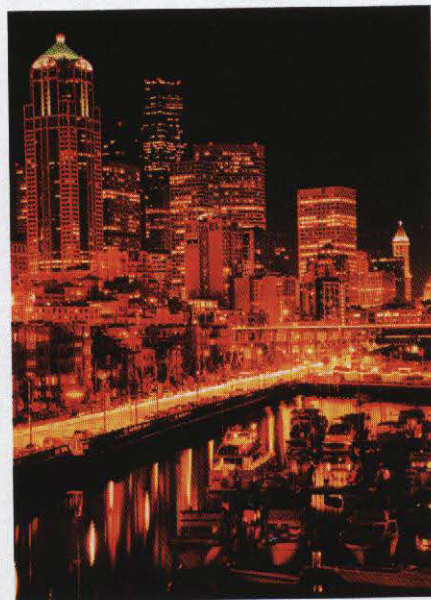
In recent years, a metamorphosis has reshaped Seattle. While the city has always been one of the prettier meeting destinations in the Northwest, these days, it's positively sparkling with urban bustle and creativity. It used to be that Seattle was all about Starbucks, wine and micro-breweries. Now it's all about art, and nowhere is this better seen than at the Seattle Art Museum's just-opened Olympic Sculpture Park.

Situated on eight waterfront acres, the park epitomizes Seattle: mountain views, waterscapes and originality, including a 2,500-ft, Z-shaped path that weaves past 20 contemporary sculptures down to the beach. "It's a fantastic location for evening receptions," says Eric Hess, senior sales manager of Destination Services NW. "The views of Elliott Bay and the Olympic Mountains are probably the best in the city, and there are areas geared to support large-scale gatherings."

The park also features the PACCAR Pavilion, a glass-and-steel structure that houses a flexible exhibition and public-event space for about 200 people – double

that amount when opened up to the covered, outdoor terraces. Adjacent to the pavilion, grass terraces lead to the Gates Amphitheater, proposed site of outdoor films and performances. As its namesake suggests, the venue is exceptionally high-tech, featuring a wide range of built-in electrical and presentation amenities.

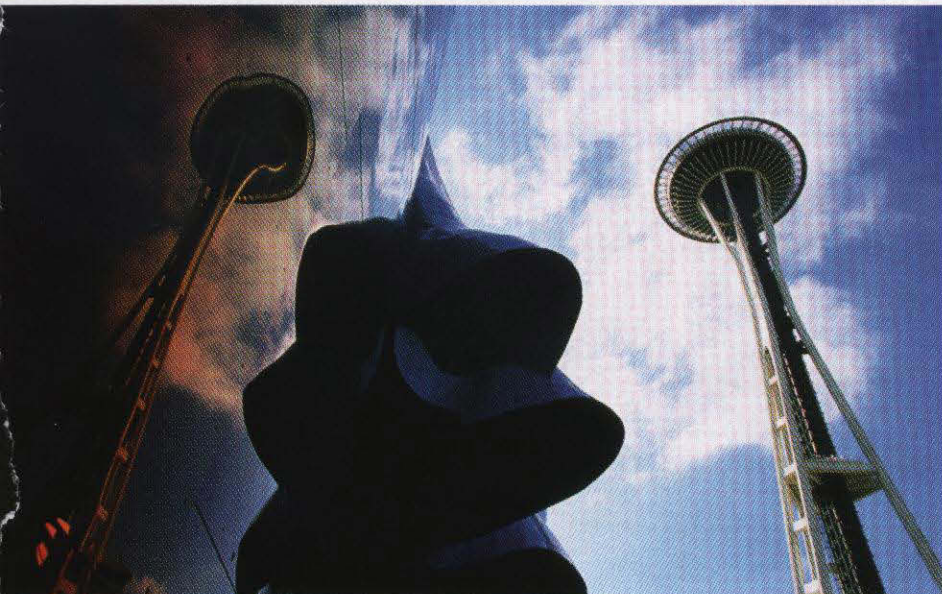
But the museum's expansion doesn't



stop there. Opened May 5, a 300,000-sq.-ft. addition more than doubles the size of its existing space and includes a dynamic new gallery for after-hours receptions.

FROM SEA TO SKY

Since opening 18 months ago, the Future of Flight Aviation Center has become a sought-after destination for meeting planners looking for a high-flying agenda. Perched at the edge of Paine Field, this intriguing venue has facilities for executive retreats, as well as versatile rooms that can accommodate up to 350, theatre-style. There's a rooftop deck for summer events (three-quarters of it tented) that overlooks Boeing's Everett facility, and its piece de resistance, the Aviation Gallery, is a showcase of prototype aircraft displayed above and below. Last year, it hosted the president of China with a luncheon for 650, while its largest event was an 1,100-strong, theatre-style presentation for Boeing. Moreover, the gallery is the only venue in the world allowing visitors to taxi an active, full-size jet into the building, as part of a meeting. There's also



an XJ5 Flight Simulator. The Boeing Tour is still a tried-and-true agenda item for many groups, and the centre adds a much-needed dimension to the experience, as will Paul Allen's Flying Heritage Collection when it opens nearby, this fall.

HIGH TECH HOTELS

Hotels, too, have restyled themselves to reflect Seattle's hip vibe. In June, 2006, the 120-room MTM Luxury Lodging's Hotel 1000 opened its doors two blocks away from the waterfront. Centred between Pike Place Market, Seattle Art Museum, Pioneer Square and the business district, its location is hard to beat. So are its high-tech amenities. With an infrastructure investment of over \$3.5-million, the hotel takes the lead, with Hotel Technology Next Generation (HTNG), featuring multiple technology vendors, including Sony, Cisco and Percipia. Result: Bathtubs that fill from the ceiling, electronically-operated privacy screens, and 6,200 sq. ft. of sophisticated, tech-enabled indoor and outdoor event space. A highlight is the Golf Club, which offers a thrilling, virtual golf experience at more than 50 of the world's top courses, including Pebble Beach and St. Andrews.

Pan Pacific Seattle opened in November, 2006, as one of Seattle's most upscale boutique hotels. Event space is geared to small groups (the largest room is 1,674 sq. ft.) and decor echoes the hotel's minimalist Japanese roots. Look for art elements such as Zebra wood, a dramatic, striped-like

wood with rich warm tones, complemented with Jerusalem limestone, alongside features such as an elliptical staircase in the lobby that appears to hang from the ceiling, and wall-sized fireplace that's backlit, appearing to float.

This year saw the opening of two new meeting properties: In January, Silver Cloud Hotel-Stadium came onto the market, with 211 guestrooms and 3,300 sq. ft. of meeting space; the largest area is a divisible ballroom of 2,250 sq. ft. Located across from Safeco Field (home of the Seattle Mariners baseball team), the WaMu Theater and Qwest Event Center, the hotel provides the opportunity for themed packages that can add a new twist to meeting itineraries.

The big news, though, is the comple-

tion of the Sheraton Seattle's \$130-million expansion, making it the largest convention hotel in the city. With the addition of 415 guest rooms in the new 25-storey Union Street Tower, the hotel has an inventory of 1,253 rooms and the ability to commit a block of 1,000. The expanded convention facilities bring its overall event space up to 75,000 sq. ft., with 47 meeting rooms and a ballroom, enlarged to 18,300 sq. ft. and offering banquet seating for 1,360.

THE ARTFUL TOUCH

"Seattle has always been an appealing destination as much for its accessibility as for its diversity," says Carol Riddle, national account executive at Seattle Hospitality Services. "That provides so much opportunity for pulling together out-of-the-box programmes, and art as decor or as part of a programme, is becoming one of the region's niche products. For example, we blow the most glass in the world – there are approximately 300 hot houses in Western Washington alone. Some studios, such as Seattle Glass-blowing Studio, will host participatory glass-blowing activities, where the resident artisan will teach you how to blow and create your own glass piece to take home. Combine that with a meal, and you can have a lot of group interaction, as participants compare their newly fashioned wine goblets."

WORTH SCOUTING

In addition to well-known locations such as the Kitsap Conference Center and Bell Harbor International Conference Center, here are three noteworthy venues:

Washington State Convention Center

- The Tasting Room is an elegant oasis whose impressive menu continues to woo planners. Planners are even encouraged to don aprons and interact with chef Jose Luis Chavez at a demonstration grill while they craft a menu specifically for their event.

Lynnwood Convention Center

- Located 15 miles north of downtown Seattle, this centre offers 34,000 sq. ft. of functional and flexible meeting space – a pleasant alternative to the urban core, and worth a look for price as well as location.

Tacoma Convention Center

- A drive-on/drive-in loading dock that can load a 12-wheel truck directly onto the exhibition floor.
- A glass and stainless steel building that sparkles inside and out.
- Panoramic glass pre-function space and art throughout the facility.

CULINARY CREATIONS

Blue Ribbon Cooking & Culinary Center adds gastronomic art to Seattle's repertoire of creative meeting programmes. Since it offers six different kitchen areas, themes from any of its classes can be turned into corporate team activities for groups of 10 to 180 'cooks.'

An event in Seattle is not complete without a wine tour, a pairing dinner or a tasting. Impressively, Washington wine regions produce more wine grapes than any other state in the U.S., except California, with a new winery opening approximately every 15 days.

Ten miles northeast of Seattle, the town of Woodinville now boasts approximately 30 wineries, including some of the state's largest – Chateau Ste. Michelle and Columbia, as well as a number of boutique operations such as Betz Family winery, Januik and Novelty Hill. Woodinville has become such a popular locale, that a 24-acre destination village is under development, due for completion in 2008.

"Food is very much a part of the Seattle experience, whether it's involving wine pairings with local wineries or working with destination restaurants to custom-create an experience," notes Hess. MacKay Restaurants, which owns several landmark eateries around town, is a case in point. Together with Hess, the restaurant company is proposing a chil-

dren's programme at its Troiani Ristorante Italiano. There, chef Peter works with children to make their own pasta, which he subsequently transforms into appetizers and main dishes. These are served to the children (and their adult supporters) later that night in a private dinner. The programme is easily adapted to adults.

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over 100 participants, at the end of which each team is expected to role-play its best story from the adventure. "The city is divided into 16 search areas, each centred around a well-known landmark, and there are nine ways to earn points," explains Seidler. "Answers might involve scavenging for an item, solving a mystery; finding a view point or talking to the locals to solicit information. By the time the group reconvenes to share their story, the participants are usually exhilarated enough to take on *American Idol* with their presentations." It's unlikely that any of them could hold a candle to previous *Idol* champ Taylor Hicks, but true to Seattle form, groups sure have fun trying. ■

—Chris McBeath is a Vancouver-based freelance writer.

THE ART OF DISCOVERY

For many, the pull of Puget Sound is the icing on the cake of what makes Seattle such a vibrant meeting destination. On top of that, organizing a floatplane excursion to any one of the often-deserted island beaches is a hot, 'can-only-do-it-here' activity. Departing from Seattle, pre- and post-tour side-trip options are endless, whether it's exploring the surrounding wine country or nearby Cascade Mountains; taking a ferry over to the San Juan Islands; continuing through to Van-

FLYING HIGH

If you've not flown into Seattle recently, you're in for a pleasant surprise. All manner of amenities have opened in the last two years, part of the airport's ongoing \$4.2-billion upgrade, along with a third runway, enhanced transportation system, new terminals and upgraded retail areas. On June 11, Air France inaugurates a new daily, non-stop route between Seattle and Paris; and in April, American Airlines started a new service between Austin, Tex. and Seattle, and Midwest Airlines launched a new route between Kansas City and Seattle. Approximately 30-million passengers passed through Sea-Tac in 2006, up 2.4 per cent over 2005. The Port of Seattle, which operates the airport, expects the upgrade to be completed in 2009.

OPENING IN 2008

- **Arctic Club Hotel** Affiliated with Summit Hotels & Resorts, this property promises to be a luxurious, 120-room hotel that blends contemporary design with elements of the historic building's former life as an exclusive men's club.
- **Four Seasons** Construction of the 21-storey, \$120-million downtown property is well underway, and will be a mix of 149 guest rooms, 36 private residences and 8,835 sq. ft. of meeting space.
- **Hyatt at Olive 8** The \$175-million, 39-storey hotel-condominium sits one block north of the existing Grant Hyatt Hotel. Expect to see 231 condominiums on the upper 22 floors and 346 hotel rooms on the lower 17 floors, as well as 15,000 sq. ft. of meeting and banquet space.
- **Hyatt Place** A much smaller Hyatt property, with only 158 rooms, is planned for Sixth Avenue and Denny Way in the South Lake Union neighborhood, one of Seattle's fastest-developing communities.