

Detroit: Expect a lot

It's more than just the Motor City

by William P. Kane



The city of Detroit, Michigan will serve as the proud host of ACRL's 9th National Conference in April 1999. Anyone who knows Detroit knows that the city's renaissance

has been going strong—pleasantly surprising unsuspecting visitors—for quite some time, thanks to billions of dollars in new investment and the accompanying renewed sense of civic vitality and confidence. Unless you've been to Motown lately, you may not expect a bustling downtown, complete with busy corporate offices, trendy shops and restaurants, packed hotels, exciting major league sports contests, a historic theater district, world-class schools, museums and libraries, and casino gambling.

Detroit has always had a great reputation as a place to build cars, to conduct business, to get things done, to work; these days, though, people are as likely to come to Detroit to relax, to enjoy delicious meals, to be entertained by terrific actors and athletes, to hear some great music, and to appreciate an uncommon cultural diversity.

Downtown Motown

Those visiting Detroit for the first time are naturally drawn to its hectic downtown, which is laid out like few other cities—diagonal spokes of a wheel emanating from a central hub. This central hub is the foot of

Woodward Avenue (the middle spoke and the east-west dividing line of the metropolitan area), where you'll find the Renaissance Center (RenCen, for short), a towering complex of offices, shops, and a 71-story hotel along the Detroit River. From high atop the RenCen, visitors are treated to a spectacular 360 degree view of the city and of Windsor, Ontario—Detroit's Canadian (though southern) neighbor. You'll also see that downtown Detroit's hexagonal grid soon gives way to a more straightforward east-west, north-south grid, easily understood by even the most directionally impaired among us.

Naturally enough for the center of the world's automotive industry, the city is circled and crisscrossed by an efficient system of freeways, mostly named after automobile pioneers—the Ford Freeway, the Fisher Freeway, the Chrysler Freeway, the Reuther Freeway, etc. In any case, drivers are thus afforded easy access to any Detroit vicinity in no time. But, perhaps contrary to conventional wisdom, you won't need a car to appreciate what Detroit has to offer.

Right along the riverfront downtown, you can enjoy the scenery in Hart Plaza, where office workers spend their lunch hours enjoying the sunshine in the summer, jazz concerts in the fall, ice skating in the winter, and watching the ocean-bound barge traffic year round. Be sure to look on the city side of Hart Plaza and check out "the fist"—a unique sculpture and local landmark honoring boxing's longtime world heavyweight

About the author

William P. Kane is co-chair of the ACRL National Conference Local Arrangements Subcommittee and regional manager at Blackwell's Book Services; e-mail: william.kane@blackwell.com

champion Joe Louis, Detroit's own Brown Bomber.

Another famous (and some say much better) statue of Louis is in Detroit's convention center, the Cobo Conference/Exhibition Center (named after former Detroit Mayor Albert E. Cobo), also right downtown. Known more commonly simply as Cobo, the huge hall houses the Michigan Sports Hall of Fame and is home to numerous yearly events and trade shows such as the North American International Auto Show.

Cobo will serve as the ACRL 9th National Conference's main meeting space. Cobo is linked directly to downtown's major hotels, restaurants, theaters, and shopping districts via the People Mover, Detroit's mini-transit system. This 13-station elevated rail system is an attraction in itself, offering a bird's eye view of the city and the river—and each station along its 2.9 mile loop is adorned with commissioned artwork reflecting the character of that station's neighborhood. For just a couple quarters, and with trains leaving every three or four minutes, the People Mover is great way to get around downtown, and an efficient and inexpensive alternative to driving and parking and taxicabs. A required People Mover stop is the Greektown station, one of downtown's hopping nightlife districts, where even frequent visitors can find a new favorite restaurant among the Greek (natch), Ethiopian, Cajun, Tex-Mex, and other ethnic flavors. If you've already had dinner, stop at Greektown anyway for some delicious desserts and coffee. Greektown is also home to Trapper's Alley, a converted 1800s fur and leather processing plant, which now includes novelty shops, restaurants, fashion stores, and the intimate Attic Theater offering a diverse schedule of plays and revues.

Entertainment

Speaking of theaters, Detroit's burgeoning Theater District is rivaled by few cities. A quick trip up Woodward Avenue and you'll spot the majestically restored Fox Theater, the State Theater, and the Gem Theater, all offering a variety of national acts almost nightly. Nearby is the recently renovated and world-class Detroit Opera House, home to opera and ballet.

If comedy is more your style, the Second City comedy club (only the third metro area



Photo credit: Bill Pugliano

The Detroit People Mover is an elevated, computer-operated transportation system that connects hotels, offices, restaurants, shops, and Cobo Conference/Exhibition Center in the central business district.

with a Chicago-born franchise) is just across the street from the Fox.

Just a few blocks away from the Theater District proper are the Fisher Theater, the Masonic Temple Theater, 1515 Broadway Theater, Orchestra Hall, and Wayne State University's Hilberly and Bonstelle Theaters—all offering lots of national and local entertainment choices.

In addition, there are big (and financially secured) plans underway for an expanded arts and entertainment complex near and within the Theater District, which will ultimately include two new side-by-side baseball (to be completed in time for the year 2000 season) and football (scheduled for completion in time for the 2001 season) stadiums, additional retail shops, glitzy movie theaters, and restaurants.

The stadiums' complementary movie theaters and restaurants (including the requisite Hard Rock Cafe) have already started to appear. If that's not enough to attract your attention (or deplete your per diems), the city of Detroit has won approval to install three Vegas-style casinos in the downtown area.

The sporting life

As you can probably tell, Detroit takes its professional sports teams seriously. Sports fans in Detroit in April can be faced with some difficult choices: catch some early season baseball, some mid-season hockey, some late-season hoops—or all three? The Detroit Tigers baseball team currently plays major league ball at historic Tiger Stadium, about a mile west of the RenCen, on the same corner of Michigan and Trumbull where Ty

Cobb and countless other greats have played for generations.

Before they move to their new digs downtown, the Detroit Lions NFL football team plays its schedule of NFL games at the Silverdome, in Pontiac, Michigan, about an hour's drive north of downtown. The NBA Detroit Pistons hoop it up in the Palace of Auburn Hills, also in the northern suburbs. Meanwhile, the 1997 Stanley Cup champion Detroit Red Wings shave the ice at the luxurious Joe Louis Arena, right downtown (and "the Joe" has its very own People Mover station). In any case, even if it's minor league hockey or college basketball or indoor professional soccer or NASCAR, you're bound to find a spectator sport to your liking, and tickets are not as hard to come by as you might imagine.

Nearby adventure

If you're more interested in participative sports, the downtown area offers easy ac-



Photo credit: Susan Stewart

Founded by Berry Gordy Jr. and home to Motown Record Corp., Hitsville USA can be found in its original state.

cess to Detroit's Belle Isle, a beautiful island park in the Detroit River, about a ten-minute ride east of downtown. Designed to emulate New York City's Central Park, Belle Isle has numerous trails for jogging, biking or blading. For the more adventuresome, there's kayaking, cricket, handball, softball diamonds, and a nine-hole golf course with driving range. At Belle Isle, you can fly kites if it's hot, or cross-country ski if it's cold. For the more laid-back, there are beautiful gardens, spectacular views of downtown Detroit's skyscrapers, a children's zoo, an aquarium, a conservatory, a nature center, and even a Great Lakes shipping museum.

The Cultural Center

But back to Woodward Avenue. Just north of the Theater District and a five-minute bus

or cab ride from Cobo is an area known as the Cultural Center, home to a cluster of the city's finest cultural enterprises, including the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Detroit Historical Museum, the Detroit Science Center, the Detroit Children's Museum, the Detroit Public Library, the Center for Creative Studies, and Wayne State University's (WSU) main and medical campuses. Other museums of note not far from the Cultural Center include the Greystone International Hall of Fame and Jazz Museum and the Motown Historical Museum. From Diana Ross and the Supremes to Madonna, from Martha and the Vandellas to Patti Smith, from Stevie Wonder to Bob Seger—there's a lot of music history in Detroit.

Another new and bright jewel among the Cultural Center's prestigious facilities is the Museum of African American History. The MAAH opened in April 1997 as the largest (112,000 square feet) African American history museum in the world. Famous for its dome and rotunda larger than many state capitol buildings, the MAAH reflects the vibrancy of the African American experience with permanent exhibits in the larger galleries, smaller galleries dedicated to arts and technology, a 350-seat auditorium, mosaic walls, beautifully tiled floors, and massive, hand-sculpted doors, providing a gracious welcome to visitors of all cultures.

Libraries, too

Of particular interest to ACRL conference-goers is the special combination of library resources and facilities within and beyond the Cultural Center. WSU hosts DALNET, the Detroit Area Library Network, which links some 20 multi-type institutions, including university, community college, special, medical, law, and public libraries in the region. In addition, the Michigan Research Libraries Triangle links WSU and DALNET with the resources of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor (about an hour west of downtown Detroit) and Michigan State University in East Lansing (about 90 minutes northwest).

The new, huge undergraduate library at WSU, opened fall 1997, with its 700-plus computer workstations and state-of-the-art multimedia facilities, as well as WSU's other library facilities, such as the renowned

Reuther Archives, are literally right across the street from Detroit Public Library's venerable main building and its new Internet Lab, and right down the street from the Detroit Medical Center's cluster of hospitals and facilities.

Richly diverse

Of course, the city and the entire metropolitan Detroit area is proud of its richly diverse ethnic heritage: nearly a million of the metropolitan area's 4.4 million and fully 75 percent of Detroit's population are African American; the southwest side, not far from Tiger Stadium, boasts Mexicantown, home to a growing number of Hispanic Americans; the first Moslem Mosque in the United States was built in Highland Park in 1919; Pope John Paul II visited fellow Polish Catholics in Hamtramck in 1987; Dearborn, on the west side of the metropolitan area, is home to the largest Arabic community outside of the Middle East; and a variety of east- and west-side neighborhoods reflect their citizenry's Italian, Irish, Jewish, and Hungarian ancestries. Not to mention the daily traffic to and from Canada. All of which results in a unique blend of people, events, languages, festivals, and flavors, which Detroit and its visitors routinely celebrate.

Nightspots

As you might expect from a place as large and diverse as Detroit, the entire city is dotted with some great eating and drinking and people-watching spots. Perhaps no such area is more eclectic than in and around the Cultural Center: from the city's swankiest restaurants where the captains of industry dine, to student bars with live bands and poetry slams, to funky coffee houses where the people who wear black groove on caffeine and college radio, to chic art galleries hosting all-night openings, to underground performance art spaces where even the people in the know wait and wonder.

Another great nightspot just east of the downtown hotels (a real short cab or shuttle ride) is known as Rivertown. Along the waterfront, this strip between the RenCen and Belle Isle was once mainly abandoned warehouses, carriage houses, and factories now converted and remodeled into loft apart-



Photo credit: Balthazar Korab

From authentic Greek restaurants, bakeries, cafes, and shops, to its unique lofts and convenience to the major freeways, Greektown is a hit with both visitors as well as locals.

ments, lively eateries, and nightclubs—places where you can get cheap eats or haute cuisine, loud metal music or cool jazz, beautiful water views or a cramped corner seat overlooking the alley.

Fun beyond

Of course, if you've got the time and the transportation, you'll want to tour beyond the Detroit city limits, where there's an endless variety of things to do and places to see. The Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum complex in neighboring Dearborn is an unforgettable (and day-long) learning experience. Touring the auto barons' homes, such as the Edsel and Eleanor Ford Estate or the Dodge Mansion, is a real treat for anyone interested in architecture or interior design or manifestations of wealth. The Detroit Zoo in Royal Oak is great family fun. If you hit it big in the casinos, you can shop in Troy's Somerset Collection (too chi-chi to be called a mere Mall). Nearby Birmingham offers lots of upscale shopping and dining. You can follow the Civil War-era underground railroad through Detroit to Canada. Fun and water extend beyond the banks of the Detroit River as the suburbs are dotted with lakes and marinas and parks.

Whatever your needs or interests—whether all business or purely personal—Detroit, the city that put the world on wheels, is eager to prove its status as ACRL-ready: ready to serve, to feed, to entertain, to surprise, to inform, and to treat conference-goers to a most enjoyable and memorable visit in 1999. From the city of Detroit, a city that's survived and thrived, that's accomplished so much, that's still growing and still changing, you should expect a lot—Detroit will deliver. ■