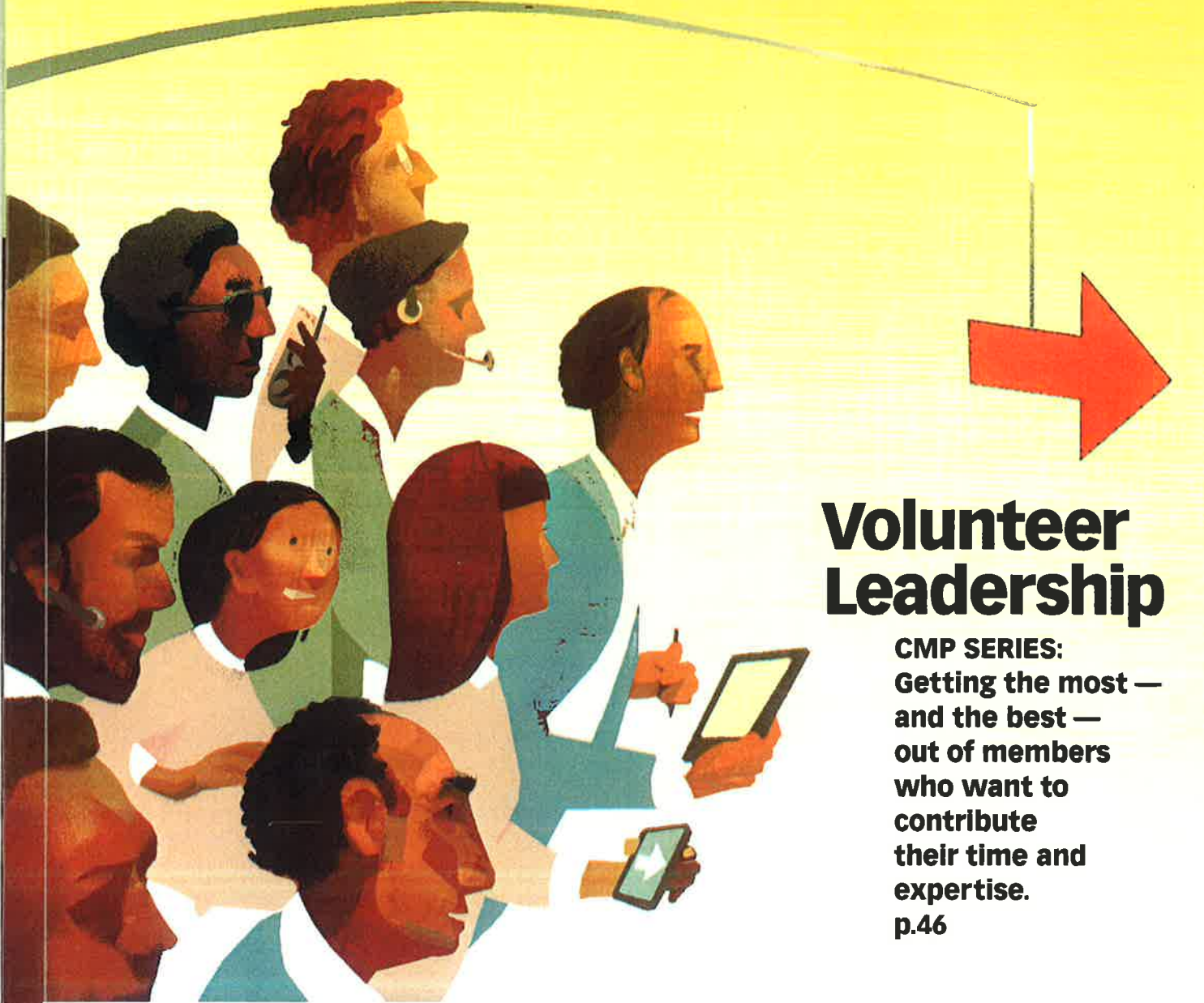


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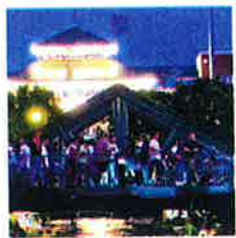
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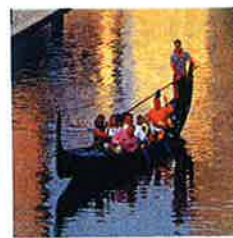
More Than Just a

pretty Place

Meeting space doesn't end inside the four walls of the convention center — which explains how and why second-tier destinations are using well-designed public spaces, natural landscaping, and walkable neighborhoods to compete with their bigger counterparts. ►



BY BARBARA PALMER





MORE THAN GREEN: Downtown St. Louis has been transformed by the award-winning Citygarden, shown at left, which combines green space and public art in a design that encourages human interaction. Below, the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center sits right on San Antonio's famed River Walk. For decades, the walkways along the river have gathered people together and recent expansions have added new, lushly landscaped sections.



For the book, Montgomery has interviewed numerous scientists whose work addresses how natural landscapes and the design of public space affect how we feel and interact with one another.

"We are surrounded by self-help books and life coaches that have led us to believe that our wellbeing is something that we do all by ourselves — that it's a matter of doing internal work," Montgomery said. But "the evidence suggests that this is not completely true. We are products of our environment, and the shapes and systems in which we move can affect how we feel, how we regard each other, and how we behave."

Understanding and embracing that can help second-tier cities level the playing field of site selection, allowing them to compete more directly with — and to offer attendees a different experience than — their first-tier counterparts.

It's Only Natural

It's not news that nature is good for us. "Psychologists have realized that there is a big connection between landscape and how we feel and behave," Montgomery said. "Simply having a view of nature can bring down your heart rate and lower the levels of stress hormones in your blood."

Indeed, a number of studies have concluded that exposure to nature is demonstrably beneficial to our health. Hospital patients with views of trees recover more quickly than those whose rooms overlook other buildings; office workers report higher job satisfaction and fewer illnesses when they have views of nature. Drivers who travel on roads passing through green space have lower blood pressure and stress levels. And surrounding ourselves in nature can help us think better. A 2009

PHOTOS COURTESY ST. LOUIS CONVENTION & VISITORS COMMISSION; SAN ANTONIO CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

15 Convention Centers in Highly Walkable Places

Second-tier cities may not be on the same footing as first-tier cities when it comes to numbers of hotel rooms or square footage of meeting space. But if planners also consider factors such as walkable downtowns, second-tier cities often shine just as brightly — and sometimes outshine — their bigger counterparts.

You can easily find out the walkability of a specific destination with an online tool developed by an organization called Walk Score. The walkability calculator (<http://walkscore.com>) uses various indicators of walkability — including access to parks, restaurants, grocery stores, and shopping — and gives destinations a score from 1 to 100. You can find out the walkability of a city as a whole, or zero in on a specific address, such as a hotel or other meeting space.

To create this list of highly walkable meeting destinations, *Convene* plugged in addresses for convention centers in 15 second-tier U.S. cities. (Scores can change; these were the scores as we went to press.) This list is not comprehensive; if you know of a highly walkable destination that doesn't appear here, we'd love to hear about it.



1. Colorado Convention Center, Denver

Walk Score: 97

The Brookings Institution ranked Denver as having the fourth most walkable downtown in the country. The convention center is within walking distance of more than 8,400 hotel rooms, as well as the 16th Street Mall, a mile-long pedestrian promenade that has more than two dozen outdoor cafés, numerous shops, and free bus transportation on every corner.



A CANAL RUNS THROUGH IT: In Oklahoma City, the Cox Convention Center is surrounded by walkable public space on all sides. One block east is the Bricktown Entertainment District, shown at left. The Myriad Botanical Gardens and Tropical Conservatory, across the street from the center, has recently undergone a \$38-million facelift. And a new community boathouse on the nearby Oklahoma River offers canoe and kayak rentals.

"Groups love coming for events on the Oklahoma River," said Sue Hollenbeck, assistant director of sports business development for the Oklahoma City Convention & Visitors Bureau, "because they know their hotel, restaurants, and entertainment are all going to be right there next to the river — which is pretty unique."

study at the University of Michigan showed that spending time in natural settings boosts cognitive skills. Participants who took walks in an arboretum showed a 20-percent improvement in tests that measured attention and focus, compared with those who took walks along city streets.

All of these benefits are especially relevant when it comes to face-to-face meetings. "It matters particularly for human interaction," Montgomery said, "because research shows that when we feel calm and less threatened, we are more likely to engage in positive ways with other people. Learning begins with that engagement between people." Two critical things happen when we move into an environment. "We are looking at the landscape around us," Montgomery said, "and we are also looking at other people. And eye contact is essential for beginning engagement with other people."

Montgomery was part of a team that put that theory into practice last fall as part of the BMW Guggenheim Lab, which was installed in a tent on public space on New York City's Lower

East Side. The three-month installation, sponsored by the Guggenheim Museum, brought artists, academics, and community members together to explore issues including urban quality of life. Among the experiments conducted at the lab were ones in which researchers attempted to configure the space in order to build feelings of trust and connection among strangers.

One exercise, for example, measured the physical reactions of strangers asked to walk straight at one another until they were almost touching noses — or until one participant turned away. When the participants moved too close together, Montgomery said, "their levels of arousal spiked; it is a very stressful experience." But, he said, it was also stressful for individuals to be too far away from each other.

'Nudge People Closer Together'

Making connections is one of the primary reasons why people attend meetings, but some facilities and venues are better at supporting interaction than others. Too many of them, Montgomery

Convention Centers in Highly Walkable Places



2. Frontier Airlines Center, Milwaukee

Walk Score: 95

The Frontier Airlines Center is in the heart of downtown Milwaukee, which ranked number 13 on Walk Score's list of "America's Most Walkable Neighborhoods." A pedestrian-friendly Riverwalk, built along the Milwaukee River, links downtown with the historic Third Ward neighborhood, home to numerous art galleries and restaurants.



3. America's Center Convention Complex, St. Louis

Walk Score: 95

A public/private partnership, Downtown Now! has been working for more than a decade to make downtown St. Louis a vibrant regional center. The results have included \$5 billion invested, and the addition of 130 new shops and restaurants and 2,500 new hotel rooms. And more than 8,000 hotel rooms are located within walking distance of America's Center.



4. Cleveland Center

Walk Score: 94

In 2005, the Brookings Institution named Cleveland one of America's "Emerging Downtowns." Plans for the downtown Cleveland Medical Mart and Convention Center — which is adjacent to thriving restaurant and entertainment districts — include improvements intended to draw people to an existing green space.



5. Albuquerque Convention Center

Walk Score: 92

Albuquerque was ranked 28th on Walk Score's 2011 list of America's 50 largest cities. The Albuquerque Convention Center — about to embark on a \$20-million renovation — lies in the heart of the city's downtown, which itself is in the midst of a 10-year, multimillion-dollar revitalization. The center is within walking distance of more than 900 hotel rooms and vibrant Central Avenue (historic Route 66).

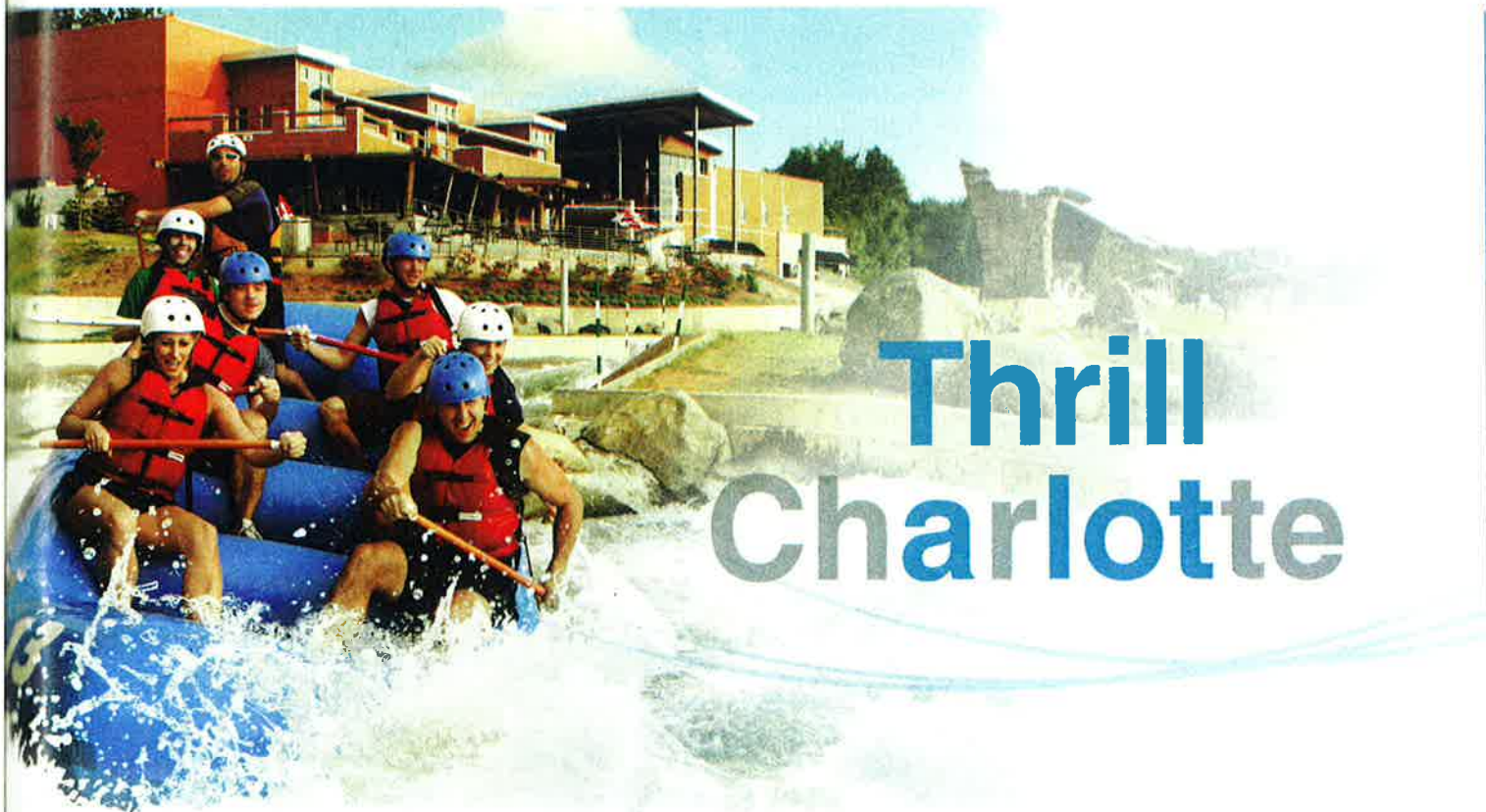
said, are surrounded by inhospitable, manmade deserts. "[Convention-center] designers often will pour resources into building grand plazas," he said, "which may serve a metaphorical function and look great from 1,000 feet in the air, but do very little to nudge people towards moments of intimacy."

Montgomery recently spoke at a conference held at a convention center where the designers included a span of green space dominated by massive, visually striking concrete structures. Unfortunately, Montgomery said, the designers placed a higher priority on making a symbolic statement than on creating a space that was congenial to human activities. "It was remarkable," Montgomery said. "This plaza which had been created at great

expense functioned like a dispersal machine. Nobody stopped there, nobody gathered there, nobody was compelled by the architectural statement."

Convivial spaces, on the other hand, affect our biology. "The best way to activate a space is to allow things to happen there," Montgomery said. And "any time you allow human activity in a space — permit an interaction, or nudge people closer together — you are allowing for the release of hormones that reward us for engaging with each other. Smiling at a stranger releases a neurotransmitter known as oxytocin, the same hormone that is released when women give birth or when we fall in love.

"Oxytocin feels great," he said. "It makes you more likely



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RENOVATING THE GREAT OUTDOORS: Work will begin this year at the Anaheim Convention Center, in Anaheim, Calif., on a project to increase the center's outdoor and special-event space by 100,000 square feet. The multipurpose "Grand Plaza," to be established in front of the center between two hotels, will include lush landscaping, walkways, fountains, and other water features, and can be used as outdoor function space or as a respite between meeting sessions.

to be nice to strangers, to open doors for them, to trust them — and perhaps even to engage with them in new business ventures.”

Feel-Good Spaces

The power of well-designed public spaces is something that meeting destinations are increasingly discovering — with second-tier cities becoming especially proficient at integrating them into their conference infrastructure. A good example is Discovery Green, a 12-acre park created by a public-private partnership between the city of Houston and the nonprofit Discovery Green Conservancy. Built on space that formerly was occupied by parking lots, Discovery Green has had more than three million visitors and hosted more than 800 public and private events since it opened in 2008.

The park mixes natural landscapes, such as tree-shaded pathways, perfect for meditative walks, with numerous opportunities for activity and interaction, from kayaking rentals to an outdoor reading room. “What makes Discovery Green

unique is the multitude of activities that happen in this urban park every day,” said Greg Ortale, president and CEO of the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau. “The park is surrounded by the hustle of downtown, but remains a tranquil escape for those who go there. Whether you’re eight years old or 80, there’s something for everyone.”

The park has had a demonstrable effect on attracting the attention of meeting and event planners, Ortale said. “Discovery Green has definitely improved meeting planners’ perception of Houston,” Ortale said. “The park provides a much-needed bridge, from the [George R. Brown] Convention Center to the Central Business District and the other hotels, restaurants, and nightlife downtown has to offer.” He added: “Big events are also making use of the space. Discovery Green played a big role in the recent National Senior Olympics and the NCAA Men’s Final Four here in Houston. So the park is certainly a major selling point, making downtown more pedestrian-friendly to convention attendees.”

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Convention Centers in Highly Walkable Places



6. Henry B. Gonzales Convention Center, San Antonio

Walk Score: 91

The convention center’s pedestrian-friendly status is secured by its location along the River Walk, the main artery of downtown San Antonio, which is being expanded from three miles to 15. Similarly, the convention center — which is adjacent to lush HemisFair Park — has added an outdoor plaza that immerses visitors in the city’s downtown.



7. Salt Palace, Salt Lake City

Walk Score: 91

The \$2-billion City Creek Center, which will feature outdoor space and a mix of residential, restaurant, and retail space, opens on 23 acres this year. The center will include an outdoor pedestrian shopping mall and six acres of public spaces, adding to Salt Lake City’s downtown renaissance.



8. Baltimore Convention Center

Walk Score: 89

The redevelopment of the Inner Harbor area of Baltimore's downtown was spearheaded by the opening of the Baltimore Convention Center in 1979. A retail and restaurant complex opened on the waterfront the next year, followed by an aquarium, museums, nightlife, restaurants, sports venues, and more than 8,500 hotel rooms — all within walking distance of the center. The compact downtown, in fact, is one of Visit Baltimore's key selling points: "In Baltimore, you're two feet away from everything."

one of the best shopping streets in America by *U.S. News & World Report*, and within walking distance of more than 100 hotels, restaurants, sports venues, and nightlife.



10. Long Beach Convention and Entertainment Center

Walk Score: 86

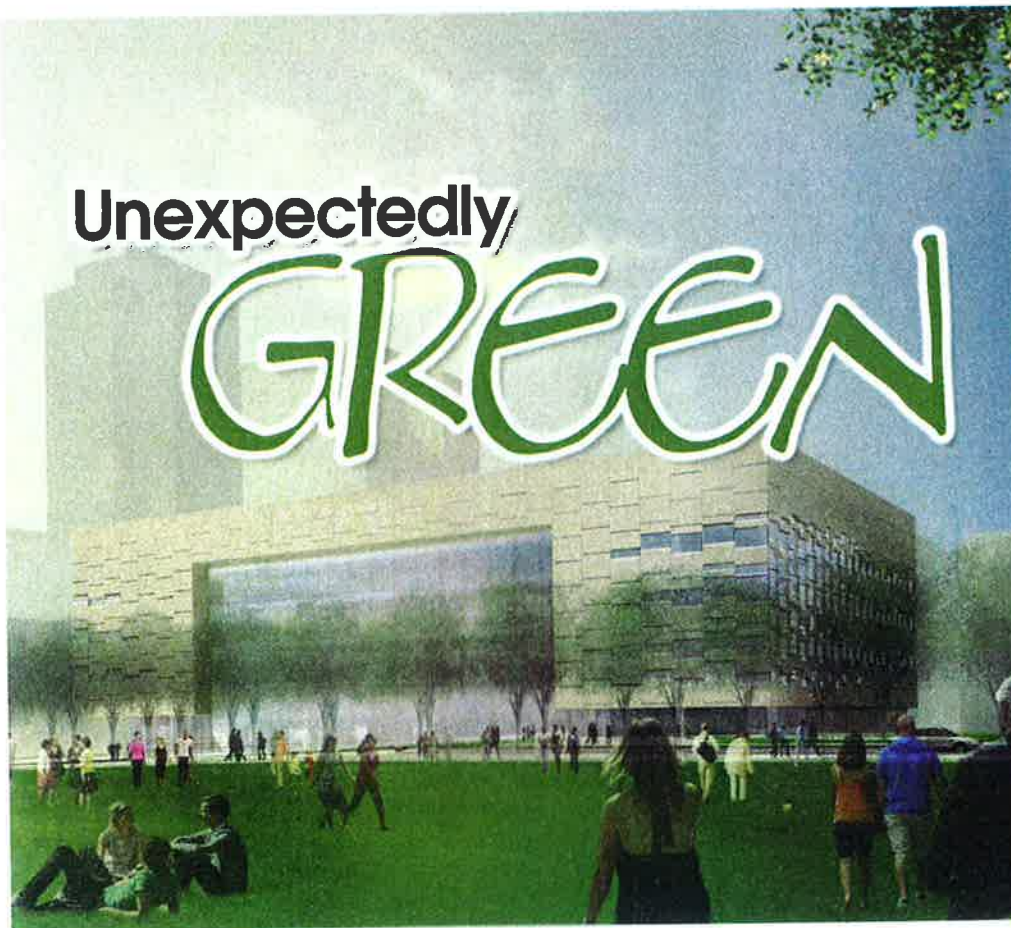
Located on the waterfront, the Long Beach Convention complex is within an eight-block radius of about 100 restaurants. Most of the city's 5,000 hotel rooms are within walking distance of the complex, and a pedestrian promenade links hotels, shops, and restaurants. A burgeoning arts district has sprung up in the city's East Village — and for added walking pleasure, there's the genesis of the city's name: five-and-a-half miles of sandy beaches.



9. Minneapolis Convention Center

Walk Score: 89

Minneapolis' cityscape surrounds a green park system, which helped the city earn a No. 9 spot on Walk Score's list of top 10 walkable U.S. cities. The Minneapolis Convention Center is in the heart of downtown, one block from the Nicollet Mall, named



Unexpectedly,

GREEN

The new Cleveland Convention Center and Medical Mart, slated to be complete in August 2013, will be a state-of-the-art, high tech, LEED certified facility with stunning views of Lake Erie. The comprehensive sustainability plan includes building a green roof, reducing the quantity of water needed in the design, optimizing energy efficiency, purchasing materials with less environmental impact and eliminating sources of indoor air pollution. Call us now to discuss meeting in the city that takes sustainability seriously.

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ON THE WATERFRONT. In Tampa, the award-winning, eight-acre Curtiss Hixon Waterfront Park, just blocks from the Tampa Convention Center, integrates the city's Riverwalk with the Tampa Museum of Art and Glazer Children's Museum and downtown dining, nightlife, and shopping. The park is just one of a series of waterfront green spaces for meeting attendees. Also within walking distance of the convention center: Lykes Gaslight Square Park, where a weekly downtown farmer's market and monthly Food Truck Rally are held.

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Citygarden, a 2.9-acre park that opened in downtown St. Louis in 2009, is another example of how good design can increase human interaction in a public space. Previously, the area technically was green space, but it wasn't well used. "It was simply a flat stretch of grass, without any invitation to tra-

verse it or to sit on it," said Paul Wagman, a spokesman for the Gateway Foundation, which funded the park's development. "There was no reason to do anything except walk across it."

The garden, which was the 2011 winner of the Urban Land Institute's Amanda Burden Urban Open Space Award, now holds 24 sculptures, walkways that offer both shade and places to sit, a video wall, a café with indoor and outdoor seating, and other features. "It's unbelievable what Citygarden has done for downtown," Wagman said. "You used to be able to come downtown

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It's all located within steps of the newly expanded and renovated Duke Energy Convention Center, which boasts one of the largest and most impressive ballrooms in the Midwest at 40,000 square feet. The convention center is flanked by \$2 billion in new infrastructure, including the brand new Fountain Square entertainment district. Nearly 3,000 hotel rooms lie within three blocks. Within minutes of downtown, you'll find thousands of more rooms. And Cincinnati USA is more accessible than any other regional city with nearly 200 daily flights to 70 non-stop destinations.



11. Phoenix Convention Center

Walk Score: 86

Phoenix has been synonymous with sprawl, but new downtown projects, including a metro light-rail system, are challenging that perception. Between 2006 and 2011, approximately \$4 billion of private and public capital was invested in the 1.5-square-mile downtown area near the Phoenix Convention Center, in projects including retail, historic preservation, and pedestrian-friendly environments.



12. San Diego Convention Center

Walk Score: 86

In the midst of the city's pedestrian-friendly urban core, the San Diego Convention Center is steps away from more than 11,000 hotel rooms, the 16-block dining, shopping, and entertainment Gaslamp Quarter district, PETCO Park, museums,

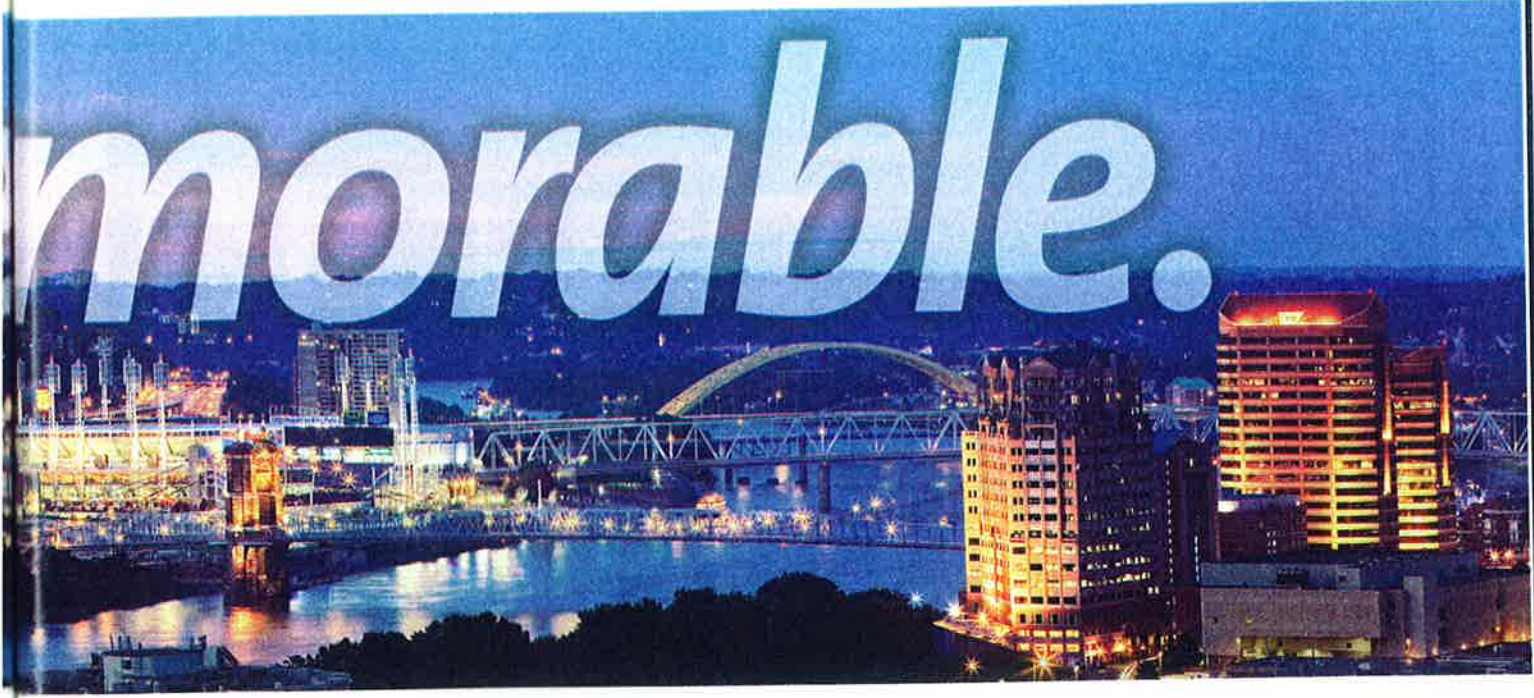
waterfront attractions, and the U.S.S. *Midway*. Expansion plans for the 2.6-million-square-foot center include outdoor terraces and a five-acre waterfront park.



13. Oregon Convention Center, Portland

Walk Score: 85


Portland's downtown is rated a "Walker's Paradise" by Walk Score, with city blocks that are only half as long as in a typical U.S. city. Portland has an extensive public-transportation system that includes streetcars and a light-rail train that runs right up to the convention center's doors.



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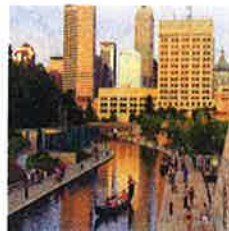
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PARADISE, UNPAVED: In Houston, the creation of the 12-acre Discovery Green (left) on land that formerly held parking lots has changed the way that meeting planners perceive the city, its leaders say. In Indianapolis, the 250-acre urban green space, White River State Park, is right across the street from the Indiana Convention Center. In addition to a canal (below), the park offers visitors access to museums, public art, concerts on the lawn, and running and walking paths.



On the Web

The nonprofit organization Project for Public Spaces (PPS) analyzes how well scores of global destinations support human interaction and offers guidelines for creating people-centered places. To learn more, visit <http://pps.org>. And read *Convene's* Leading by Example profile of PPS founder Fred Kent at <http://bit.ly/Convene-PPS>.

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on a weekend and if the Cardinals were not playing [at St. Louis' downtown baseball stadium], it was dead, dead, dead. Now there are throngs of people. People bring their children and grandchildren to the park, but young people also consider it a hip place

to have a date. People walk their dogs. Everyone there seems pleased to be there. It just creates a good vibe."

Wagman didn't offer any empirical evidence that the park produces oxytocin in visitors, but his description of the mood it evokes makes that seem likely: "It has the feeling of being at a sporting event where your team is winning."

Citygarden is six blocks away from the America's Center Convention Complex; conference attendees often head to the park, particularly if it's a beautiful day, said Donna Andrews, director of public relations for the St. Louis Convention & Visitors Commission. Andrews herself often eats her lunch there. "It's an oasis in the heart of downtown," she said. "I love to go there and just watch the people."

The park's designers "created something obviously marvelous and of universal appeal," Wagman said. "Its immense popularity shows the hunger for this kind of space that we could only have guessed at." ■

► **Barbara Palmer** is a senior editor of *Convene*.

Convention Centers in Highly Walkable Places



14. George R. Brown Convention Center, Houston

Walk Score: 83

The creation of the 12-acre Discovery Green in downtown Houston has brought global attention to the city. In 2011, Discovery Park, adjacent to the convention center, was the recipient of one of the first *World Architecture News* Effectiveness Awards, given to projects that profoundly affect society.



15. Indiana Convention Center, Indianapolis

Walk Score: 80

Twelve hotels with a combined 4,700 rooms are connected via climate-controlled skywalks to the recently expanded Indiana Convention Center — more hotel rooms connected to a center than anywhere else in the United States. Additionally, there are more than 200 restaurants and 50 major attractions within walking distance of the center, as well as White River State Park, a 250-acre urban green space, right across the street.