

A photo taken in 1986 shows the George R. Brown Convention Center being built.

STEVE HENRY: SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE



A reason to celebrate the George R. Brown Center

Convention center, which has been vital to city, turns 20

By BOB EURY

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At a solitary construction site on the eastern edge of downtown Houston in the mid-1980s, with oil slumping and a recession brewing, seeds were sown for the remarkable development our central business district has reaped in the 21st century.

The George R. Brown Convention Center, which sat alone on the fringe of downtown when it opened in 1987, remains the nucleus for new growth in the city center. This month the Brown celebrates its 20th anniversary as one of Houston's most recognizable and important buildings.

Two decades ago, the new convention center was conceived amid a bleak patchwork of surface parking lots and small warehouses assembled by Texas Eastern Corp. It was not surrounded by some of the landmarks that many downtown visitors identify with today — Minute Maid Park, Toyota Center, the Hilton America-Houston hotel and Five Houston Center.

The 12-acre Discovery Green park, the Houston Pavilions entertainment and retail hub and the One Park Place high-rise residential tower — each of which will come to life in the coming two years — weren't figments of anyone's imagination back then. Ditto for Discovery Tower, Embassy Suites and other projects still on untold drawing boards.

The one constant in the neighborhood has been the George R. Brown, which has welcomed 15 million guests to downtown Houston and remains a vital economic engine for the city.

Convention visitors have generated \$15 billion in direct spending, multiplying to a total economic impact in excess of \$37 billion, according to estimates by Destination Marketing Association International. Each convention attendee spends an average of \$1,036 during his or her stay in Houston. It is this steady, predictable stream of visitors and revenues that makes proximity to the George R. Brown attractive to those looking to invest in Houston.

In the early '80s, after city leaders and convention officials deemed as obsolete the old Albert Thomas Convention Center, now the present-day Bayou Place complex in the Theater District, they didn't have far to look for a new convention center site. The availability of inexpensive real estate, combined with a generous donation of property by Texas Eastern, factored largely in the decision to build on the largely dormant east side of downtown. A generation later, others would follow suit.

A steady drumbeat of convention business spawned expansion of the GRB in 2003, and today more large shows are placing Houston on their radar screens. Last week, the Produce Marketing Association brought 17,000 to town for Fresh Summit 2007, a showcase for the fresh fruit, vegetable and floral industries. This week, the hugely popular International Quilt Market will begin to move in.

Next year, the GRB will welcome Meeting Planners International, HeliExpo and Microsoft all large, prestigious shows that could yield similar events down the road.

The convention business is a highly competitive arena, and Houston has carved a niche as a city that meeting planners take seriously. Much work has been done, but more remains in order for us to become a top-tier destination.

Downtown Houston's hotel inventory is far below that of the elite convention cities. Another convention headquarters hotel would be put to good use.

John Keeling, senior vice president of PKF, the hotel and restaurant consulting firm, says downtown Houston is "underhoteled by a large number."

Discovery Green and Houston Pavilions will be welcome additions, but more retail, dining and entertainment options will be needed as larger convention groups come calling.

Improving the mobility in the central business district is another "must." Better circulation by both taxis and alternative transit is needed. Providing a connected, pedestrian experience is essential. Parking is always a work in progress.

Downtown is the safest sector of the city, but our guests must share that perception.

Convention officials are keenly aware of all these issues and are working diligently with other downtown stakeholders to achieve solutions.

The George R. Brown has been a positive agent of change in downtown Houston for 20 years. It's no wonder that hotels, restaurants and other service providers increasingly want to become part of the neighborhood.

The George R. Brown Convention Center's 20th birthday is one the entire city should celebrate.

Eury is president of Central Houston and executive director of the Houston Downtown Management District.

The USA Pear Bureau Northwest was one of many displays Sunday at the Produce Marketing Association's Fresh Summit International Convention & Exposition at the George R. Brown Convention Center.

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