



# Behold *the Pandemic-Proof Convention Center*

An optimistic architect hits the road to pitch bold new event space expansions, hoping dentists and accountants are once again ready to schmooze in style

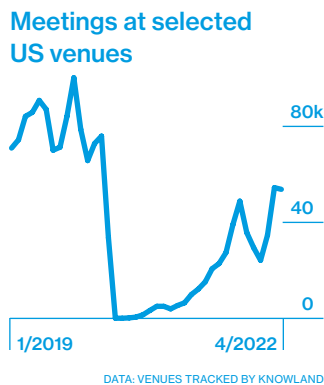
By Devin Leonard  
Illustration by Yann Kebbi

In a better time, the five exhibition halls of the BMO Centre in Calgary might have been flooded with thousands of dermatologists or tax attorneys. You can imagine their voices as they roam a sea of exhibitors' booths, bleary-eyed from the previous night's barhopping, wondering how they'll clear their heads in time for happy hour. Instead: 250,000 square feet of dead silence, much as the center has been throughout the pandemic.

Listen carefully, though, and you can hear unexpected activity—the low thrum of cranes and construction workers going about their business outside. Counterintuitively, construction is under way on a \$390 million expansion, planned and financed before the pandemic began, that will double the BMO Centre's size. And who's here today to take it all in but Michael Lockwood, head of the convention center team at Populous, an architecture firm in Kansas City, Mo. "You kind of have to pinch yourself," he says. "You're, like, all right, it's happening." Bundled in a black overcoat on a wintery February day, the designer gazes up at the steel skeleton rising beside the existing building and describes what the expanded center will be like when it opens in 2024.

On the ground level in front of us, conventioners will flock to airport-style retail, including a cowboy couture shop featuring gear appropriate for the annual Stampede festival held nearby. For the second level, Lockwood conjures images of delegates warming themselves and swapping business cards beside an enormous fireplace meant to evoke the spirit of the West. And on the third level will be what Populous describes as the center's "crown jewel": a 50,000-square-foot ballroom where black-tie-clad revelers can network while marveling at the Canadian Rockies.

This vision presumes, of course, that the convention center trade is about to recover—and swiftly. The proposition is hardly guaranteed. Few industries have been more devastated by the pandemic. In 2019, 35 million people attended professional conventions and trade shows in the US, according to the industry-funded Center for Exhibition Industry Research. The next year the number plunged to 7 million after cities and states outlawed large gatherings and turned convention centers into Covid-19 hospitals and homeless shelters. Layoffs were widespread at trade associations and professional societies, which make much of their revenue filling conventions with paying members and high-spending exhibitors. Virtual events couldn't make up the difference. "They just didn't make any money," says Mark Tester, executive director of the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando. Major upgrades were canceled or put on hold, and everyone hunkered down to wait out the pandemic.



With most convention centers reopening last year, attendance rose to 11 million, and CEIR forecasts that the head count could be as high as 36 million next year. Others are more pessimistic about when large-scale gatherings will return. "I've been to an event that has 500 people," says Kristi White, chief product officer at Knowland, a tracker of the US meetings market. "But an event that has 20,000 people? I'm going to take a moment and think about that. I'm still wearing a mask on a plane."

And yet some major convention centers, like Calgary's, have expanded during the pandemic, in many cases adding pragmatic touches such as hospital-grade air filtration or extravagances such as outdoor terraces and rooftop ballrooms. The Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York planted a 1-acre farm on its roof. "These are pumpkins, peas, beans behind them. Onions, leeks, garlic over there," says Alan Steel, the center's chief executive officer, as he proudly strolls its perimeter.

Lockwood is hustling to get in on the action. In 2020, Populous was the top US convention center designer, with \$24 million in revenue, according to *Building Design + Construction* magazine. But then it had big projects in Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Orlando halted because of the pandemic. Other parts of the company's sports and live event business are humming again, landing splashy projects including a stadium for the NFL's Buffalo Bills and a climate-neutral events arena in Munich. But conventions haven't followed suit.

Lockwood, like many in his line of work, maintains that individuals need to congregate in person and that the industry can rebound and even get stronger. To succeed, he'll have to convince risk-averse clients that pricey makeovers are just the thing to draw conventioners back. Even in the best of times, he concedes, that can be a challenge. "People don't usually go to conventions for fun," Lockwood says. "Unless it's Comic Con."

Lockwood wasn't destined to become a convention center superfan. Tall, bearded, and something of an introvert, the 45-year-old grew up in Redding, a small city in Northern California. He ran track at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, graduating with a degree in architecture in 2001. Then he joined the sports division of architecture firm HOK, which would later be spun off as Populous. One of Lockwood's first assignments was to briefly try out each of the 68,000-plus seats in Gillette Stadium, the new HOK-designed home of the New England Patriots in Foxborough, Mass. "You've got to sit in it and make sure that it's bolted in correctly," he says.

But conceiving palaces where the likes of Tom Brady would throw spirals appealed less to Lockwood than doing it for thousands of Zumba instructors to trade best practices. "Many people find them as exciting as the DMV, just another department of the local government," he says of convention centers. "Sorry, we don't think that."

In Lockwood's telling, American convention centers have gone through four distinct phases. The first ones, built in the late 1960s and early '70s, were simply massive exhibit halls. "A box with loading docks," he says. In the second phase, developers added lobbies and meeting rooms. In the third, ballrooms and food courts. By the time Lockwood got into the industry, convention centers had arrived at a golden age, incorporating windows, outdoor plazas, and nooks for delegates to chat in while recharging their phones—touches he says were intended to spark spontaneous relationship building and make lanyard-wearing delegates feel that their trek to San Antonio or Oklahoma City hadn't been for naught.

If this evolution sounds less than radical, there's a reason. "This industry is really conservative," Lockwood says. But it also has money, often drawn from local hotel and rental car taxes, making high-dollar expansion proposals viable propositions.

After four years at HOK, Lockwood left to work back home in Redding, mostly designing fancy houses. In 2007 he returned to HOK, persuaded by Todd Voth, then head of its convention center team, to take on a bigger role. "I'd really like to get you to be the lead designer," Voth recalls saying. They became a team, with Voth sweet-talking clients and Lockwood urging them to embrace innovation.

That's a card many convention center architects like to play. "We all say the same thing," says Brian Tennyson, a principal at LMN Architects in Seattle, which designed the \$1.9 billion Seattle Convention Center Summit Building, opening next year.

Still, Lockwood's pitches resonated with some clients, and Populous won design contests from Sacramento to Sydney. He may, however, have been out-innovated in the competition to design the \$1 billion expansion of the Las Vegas Convention Center five years ago. The facility, which opened last year, doubles as an homage to Elon Musk, incorporating a system of underground tunnels courtesy of his Boring Co., through which conventioners are shuttled



Lockwood

about in electric cars from his Tesla Inc. (Lockwood says the Populous team's design emphasized walkability and would have been as much as \$100 million cheaper. Rob Svedberg, a principal at TVS Design in Atlanta, which led the project, touts the expanded center's high ceilings, alcoves, and rooftop terrace with fabulous views. "It's just been incredibly well received," he says.)

When Covid appeared, any Populous project not already pretty far along was suddenly in jeopardy. Lockwood flew around the US, sometimes one of only a few people on the plane, trying to keep them going. Nevertheless, an expansion in Orlando was terminated, and major new projects in Los Angeles and New Orleans were paused. Populous had two rounds of companywide layoffs in 2020. "We just didn't have the work," he says.

As conventioners have started to reappear in cities, Lockwood has hit the road again, trying to get his business back on track. One of the events he attends, put on in January by the Professional Convention Management Association at Caesars Forum in Las Vegas, is perhaps best described as a convention convention—one of several similarly meta events. (There's also the International Association of Convention Centres' convention and a Meeting Professionals International conference billed as "the expert event for event experts.") Some of Lockwood's current and prospective clients are staffing booths on the exhibit floor or hosting happy hours in hopes of persuading trade association representatives to hold gatherings at their buildings.

A constant theme of this year's PCMA convention is how great it is to be back together in person. On the first morning, the association treats members to a surprise performance by Paula Abdul, who plays her hits accompanied by a dance troupe and makes several costume changes along the way. "Wow, who needs caffeine when you've got Paula Abdul!" says Holly Ransom, the morning's master of ceremonies.

Delegates are also encouraged to take a high-intensity Orangetheory fitness class, do chair yoga, improve their headshots, and polish their elevator pitches at something called the (Re) Brand U Lounge. There's even primal therapy, for anyone who wants to scream into a paper bag to relieve the frustration built up during all those glitchy pandemic virtual meetings. Conventions are back!

With the necessary precautions. All the conventioners are masked, and nobody's allowed in without providing proof ▶

"Many people find them as exciting as the DMV, just another department of the local government. Sorry, we don't think that"



Renderings of the redesigns for the Morial Center in New Orleans (left) and the BMO Centre in Calgary (right)

◀ of vaccination. Kirsten Olean, the PCMA's outgoing chair, declares at a press conference that there's no safer place to be. "The types of attendees that we have at our conferences—business travelers, college educated—are very, very heavily vaccinated," she says.

And yet attendance is light. Only about 2,300 people have shown up, almost half the number of the PCMA's annual meeting in January 2020. An additional 600 tune in online. Ninety-six of those who attend in person go on to test positive for Covid.

Lockwood is undeterred. In the early evening, he heads to Jimmy Kimmel's Comedy Club to see Tester, the Orlando convention center director, who's hosting a happy hour. Pre-pandemic, Lockwood's group had been designing a \$605 million expansion of the 7 million-square-foot center, working with a local company, but the project was canceled. In Vegas, Tester's people are pitching as best they can, but conferences are typically booked years in advance, and he says customers remain leery with Covid still circulating. "Nobody's ready to have that conversation yet," he says. Existing bookings were at least holding steady through omicron, after a rash of fall cancellations that Tester attributes to the delta variant, but attendance was down. Any discussion of rebooting the expansion would need to wait at least another year—"maybe even a little longer." Lockwood stands by, drinking a Stella Artois as he listens to the rundown.

From there he heads over to the Momofuku on the second floor of the Cosmopolitan hotel with Adam Paulitsch, who assumed Lockwood's former role as the convention group's lead designer when his boss was promoted last year. The two settle into a quiet corner table overlooking the Strip. They're joined by Michael Sawaya, the ebullient president of the New

Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, where Populous-guided upgrades went on hold in the pandemic's early months. Cocktails are ordered. Sawaya requests the wine list.

"There's a \$5,000 bottle of wine on here," he says.

"Is this being billed to the New Orleans Convention Center?" Paulitsch jokes.

Sawaya suggests a California cabernet, the cheapest wine on the menu.

The food, at least, is first-rate: deep-fried duck confit, chicken wings, kimchi, crispy rice, and Brussels sprouts. The Morial Center is one of the projects Lockwood has managed to keep afloat during the pandemic. Sawaya hired the company in 2018 to oversee a rethink of the lobbies in the 3 million-square-foot building on the Mississippi River. Once the pandemic hit, the \$300 million project was paused, and Sawaya nudged Populous to come up with a better concept for the future. He says he almost fainted with joy at what Lockwood's group proposed: a grand staircase leading up to a rooftop ballroom.

"We were just throwing out big ideas," Lockwood says with a shrug.

"They can't even emulate it in Las Vegas," Sawaya says.

The next morning, I meet up with Lockwood on the sunlit plaza outside Caesars Forum. At the surrounding tables, other delegates stare at their phones or laptops—rapt in anticipation, perhaps, of the day's schedule, featuring more motivational speakers and the chance to "get down with DJ Warren Peace" at a networking reception on the Strip. "You know why people are at the convention?" Lockwood asks. "Because magic happens. People come together because there's this innate human understanding that, 'Hmm, something unexpected might happen. That's why I need to go.'" COURTESY POPULOUS (4)

We catch two hyper-earnest young keynote speakers, one talking about climate change and the other about a free app he created to help people with disabilities communicate. Tester pitches everyone on his center, accompanied by kangaroo-stilt jumpers and a drum corps with flashing lights on their uniforms and instruments.

Outside afterward, Paulitsch tells Lockwood he needs to give someone from Houston some material about the New Orleans project. They're also hoping to impress officials who are planning a potential \$1.4 billion expansion in Austin by showing them around a futuristic Populous-designed space in town. "Do we necessarily need a happy hour afterwards?" Paulitsch asks.

"No," Lockwood says. "There's plenty of opportunities to drink everywhere."

The tour, he later reports, goes well.

In early February, Lockwood and Paulitsch journey to Banff, the resort town in the Canadian Rockies about an hour west of Calgary, to confer with Greg Newton, the general manager of the BMO Centre. He's waiting for them in a bar at the luxurious Fairmont Banff Springs hotel, a glass of malbec in hand. A server fetches a bottle of the same stuff and some extra glasses. The table is soon covered with plates of hummus, dumplings, flatbreads, and bison tartare. "This tartare is great," Paulitsch says, digging in.

Newton and his staff are delighted that the BMO Centre expansion is under way after two lean years. "They're seeing the construction and thinking, 'There's hope,'" he says.

The next morning is frigid and clear. The three reconvene in a high-ceilinged hall with a gorgeous view of the surrounding peaks. Sitting in a high-backed leather chair, Newton offers a darker long-term view than some of his peers, predicting that Covid variants will continue to roil the industry.

"It may take us as far as 2030 before we see a stabilization," he says.

"Did you say 2030?" Lockwood asks, sounding startled. He speculates that future conventions could be more like the e-sports business, with some people attending in person and many more watching online. "Why aren't we having that conversation?" he asks.

Newton argues that the industry should focus on offering better service. He's brought seven of his top executives to the hotel for two days of workshops on this very subject, led by Charles MacPherson, a professional butler and TV personality who advises corporate clients on how to pamper customers.

Lockwood and Paulitsch stick around for the morning session. A seasoned performer, MacPherson oozes charm, recounting an early gig toiling under a

butler who was undone by a weakness for coffee laced with liqueur. "That's why his career came to an end and mine started," MacPherson says. "Great guy, though—always smiled."

On the way back to Calgary, Lockwood and Paulitsch talk about the week ahead. They'll spend most of it in Texas: Dallas, Fort Worth, and Houston. Lockwood later reports that Populous has been shortlisted to be the designer for a convention center expansion in Fort Worth. (The company ends up losing out.)

When I check in with Sawaya in April, he says he has the American Association for Cancer Research coming to New Orleans for its yearly convention. Face coverings will be required, and that's fine by him. "If they want me to dye my hair blue and walk around the building, I'm going to do it," Sawaya says. "As long as they pay the bill." In Orlando, Tester is hosting the McDonald's Worldwide Convention. "It's at 100% of pre-Covid levels," he says. "They have Bruno Mars playing tonight. They had Pink yesterday."

Still, Heywood Sanders, a professor of public administration at the University of Texas at San Antonio who's tracked the industry for years, isn't convinced the corporate-sanctioned good times will once again roll. His research has shown that the combined attendance at conventions and trade shows at the nation's four largest centers—in Atlanta, Chicago, Las Vegas, and Orlando—was already dipping before the pandemic. "I suspect the industry will never fully recover," he says.

In late May, Lockwood acknowledges that business still hasn't bounced back much. "The pandemic has still sort of got people a little off-kilter, a little on edge," he says. Meanwhile he's been pitching in on some student athletic facility proposals. "I'm always trying to look at the upside of things," he says. "If I can't work on these projects, then I've got to help somewhere." **B**