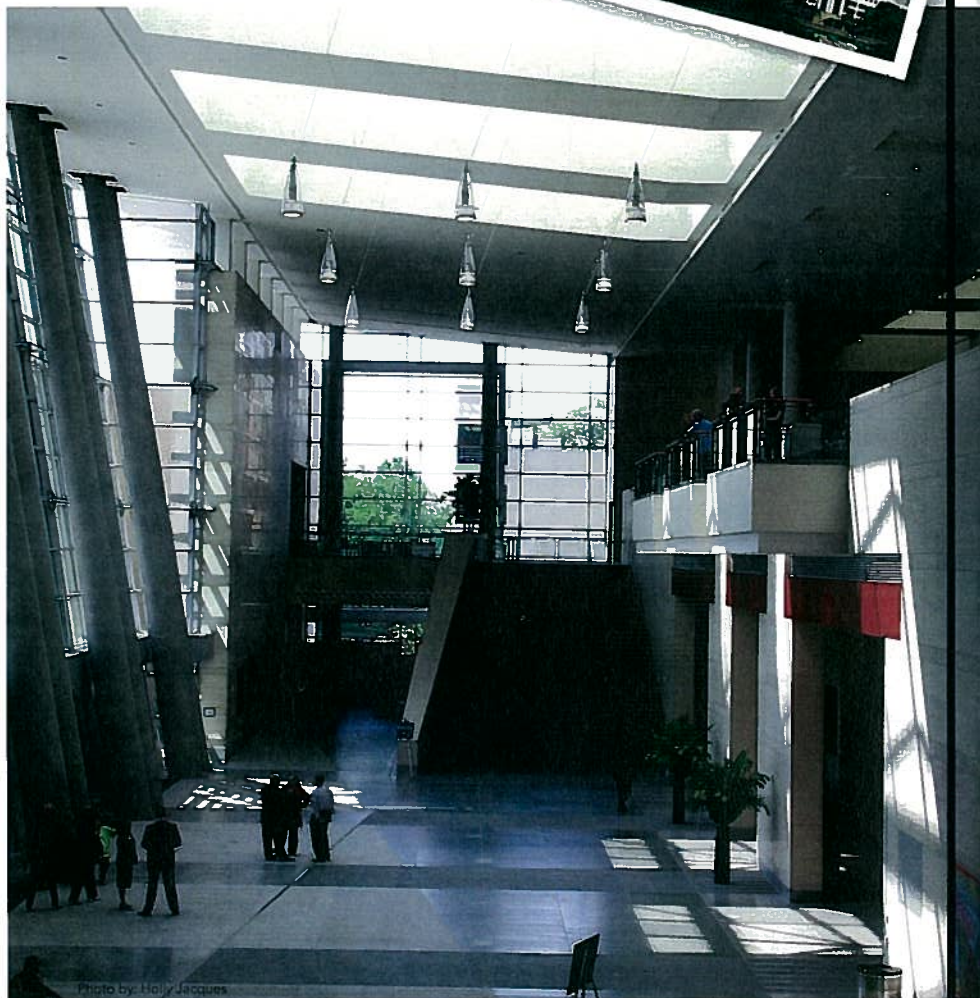
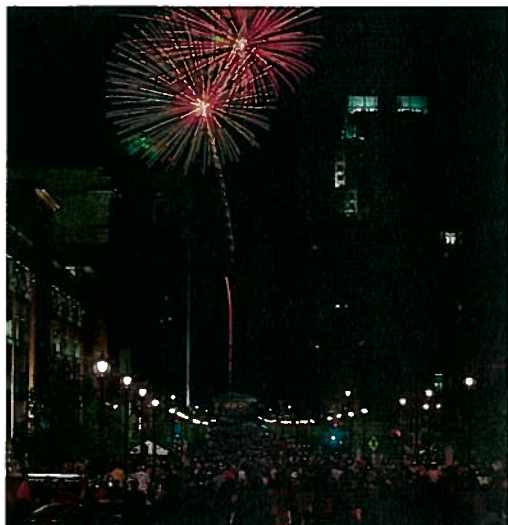


A Raleigh Renaissance

North Carolina's capital is courting meetings with a revitalized downtown

by TYLER DAVIDSON



Cause for Celebration: A \$2 billion downtown renaissance has brought fireworks to Raleigh (above left), via a brand-new convention center (above and inset). Nearby, the North Carolina Museum of Art (left) is undergoing a massive expansion that will maximize its special events space.

A SHINING STAR ON THE HIGH-TECH SCENE, AS WELL AS THE home of North Carolina State University, Raleigh, N.C., has been blessed with a solid base to fuel its meetings industry at least on the regional level, but is now widening its appeal to groups via \$3 billion in development—\$2 billion in its downtown alone.

The centerpiece of the transformation is the new Raleigh Convention Center, which opened in early September and offers 500,000 square feet of space—a 500,000-square-foot expansion is already being planned—and an advanced tech backbone.

“Certainly the convention center was the catalyst of the downtown revitalization,” says Denny Edwards, president and CEO of the Greater Raleigh CVB. “This year, 20 more restaurants have opened downtown. Over 3,500 condos have opened in the last year, which is bringing a lot of liveliness to downtown. There’s just a bigger buzz between the attendees and the residents and employees in the downtown area, which will bring more outlets, such as restaurants, to support it.”

Designed by Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback and Associates, the firm that envisioned The Washington DC Convention Center, the Raleigh facility utilizes large open spaces with wide expanses of glass, allowing natural light to pour in. In fact, the Raleigh Convention Center bears a

striking resemblance, architecture-wise, to its capital city cousin.

The publicly financed facility boasts a large collection of local art and a dramatic 32,000-square-foot ballroom with ceilings over 30 feet tall and a decor that celebrates the prominence of the region’s textile industry. The convention center also offers 20 individual meeting rooms that add an additional 32,000 square feet of space, with free wireless Internet service in all public spaces; a 5,000-seat amphitheatre is also on tap.

Raleigh has also welcomed a new hotel to its convention core, the 400-room Marriott Raleigh City Center, which brings an additional 15,000 square feet of meeting space into the fold and is located across the street from the convention center near the existing Sheraton Raleigh Hotel. A couple of smaller, independent hotels are on the drawing boards.

Splashy off-site event facilities include the historic Progress Center for the Performing Arts, with 80,000 square feet of space in four distinct theaters, and the North Carolina Museum of Art, located a short drive away from downtown and which is undergoing a massive expansion.

Of course, with the revamping of Raleigh, one would hate to think that the area has lost its folksy allure.

“Along with all the redevelopment, the one thing I don’t think we’ve lost is our charm,” Edwards says. “I think we’ve kept our Southern charm.” ●