

Cobo Center is in the midst of a \$300-million renovation.



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Halftime in Detroit

We've all seen the ads. First it was Eminem's adrenaline-thumping ode to his hometown that aired during the 2011 Super Bowl. The next year it was Clint Eastwood who made a nation stop for two minutes and listen to his chilling, gravelly monologue about halftime in Motor City — and the entire United States.

On my first, flurry-filled evening in Detroit this past January, I couldn't help but ask my hosts with the Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau (DMCVB) about these ads over dinner at ROAST, the Michael Symon restaurant tucked inside the lobby of the 453-room Westin Book Cadillac Detroit, where I was staying. It turns out that neither the CVB nor anyone associated with the city had anything to do with the famous Chrysler "Imported From Detroit" ads. It was the first of many examples I found of how synonymous the American auto industry is with Detroit — where I was in town for the North American International Auto Show (NAIAS).

Every January, close to 800,000 visitors pass through the doors of Cobo Center to see the latest and greatest

on four wheels. (Read our report from NAIAS at convn.org/naias-2013.) The last several years hadn't been easy for NAIAS, the auto industry, or Detroit, but things were looking up — NAIAS signed a five-year contract to stay at Cobo Center through 2017, this year's show had its highest attendance in eight years, and Cobo Center is just two years away from completing a dramatic \$300-million overhaul and expansion.

It's a positive trend that's also showing up in the ongoing revitalization of and investment in downtown. The scars of the city's decade-long decline are still visible, but signs of new life — and a more positive future — are beginning to overshadow them. In 2012, downtown residency reached a record high of 97 percent. Major companies like Quicken Loans, Compuware Corporation, DTE Energy, Strategic Staffing Solutions, and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan not only have moved their headquarters downtown in recent years, but are giving incentives to their employees to live and stay there. Mixed-use developments with residential, commercial, and retail space are springing up, and

vacant buildings are being purchased and revitalized.

Cobo Center is no exception to this citywide renaissance. In fact, it may be the centerpiece of it. On the Friday before the public show portion of NAIAS began, Thom Connors, regional vice president of SMG and Cobo Center's general manager, gave us a tour of the facility's expansion and renovation. Parts of the project were opened temporarily just for this year's NAIAS, including a new 30,000-square-foot, riverfront atrium that hosted a ribbon cutting and Uncle Kracker concert.

Just a few steps away from the atrium, the 40,000-square-foot Grand Ballroom — overlooking the Detroit River and the Windsor, Ontario, skyline — is in progress. New meeting rooms a level below will add breakout space to Michigan Hall, while new parking garages and 23,000 square feet of new exhibition space for Oakland Hall have already been completed. Plans for new food concessions and food-service support areas are in the works, and an exterior digital billboard and dramatic all-glass entryway will welcome groups on the center's East Side later this year.

The hotel community in Detroit is being revitalized as well. The historic Westin Book Cadillac Detroit, built in 1924, earned the National Preservation Award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2009 for its three-year, \$180-million restoration after the hotel stood vacant for more than two decades. Now it's a hip architectural gem buzzing with the who's who of Detroit. ROAST's inventive menu has earned praise from the *Detroit Free Press* and *Esquire* magazine, and Chef Michael Symon is almost a household name, with multiple shows on the Food Network. It's just another example of how Detroit is reinventing itself by merging its past with the future. ♦

— Jennifer N. Dienst

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