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ON LOCATION:

Southbridge Hotel & Conference Center



BY CAROLEE NOURY

SET IN A CHARMING SUBURB about an hour's drive from Boston, Providence, and Hartford, the Southbridge Hotel & Conference Center in Southbridge, Mass., is a well-appointed meeting venue with an interesting history of reinvention.

The 203-room hotel building is the former home of American Optical, long the primary employer for Southbridge residents. Floods destroyed parts of the building twice in AO's 180-year history, but both times the business prevailed. Eventually, in the late 1990s, AO ceased most operations in Southbridge. In 2000, the transformation of the inactive factory into the hotel and conference center offered a significant boost to the local economy. The original AO clock tower

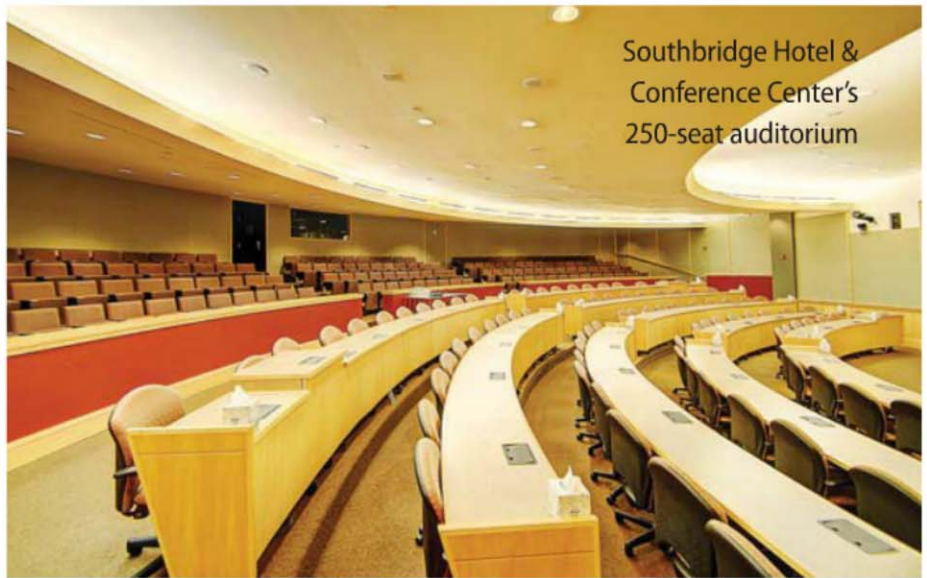
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isn't the only thing Southbridge Hotel shares with its predecessor; it upholds the AO tradition of strength and resilience as well.

While Southbridge Hotel's considerably shorter history hasn't been as dramatic as AO's was, the team has dealt with shifting client needs. "We know how many options event planners have across the country, particularly here with three major cities nearby," says Southbridge Hotel Director of Sales Karl Chase.

"We work with our clients to make their events seamless. From flexible spaces, to outdoor options, to state-of-the-art technology, we do our best to give them reasons to come back each time."

As a reinvented facility, Southbridge Hotel fits into what Dr. Nadya Zhexembayeva (called "The Reinvention Guru" by *In Ventures* magazine), sees as a necessary business practice today. "Reinvention is an active choice to renew," she says. "It's finding a new and better way of being. It is also an act of letting go of everything but your very best." Companies must do this, she adds because "the speed of change is accelerating, and therefore, so is the speed with which we need to reinvent.



Southbridge Hotel & Conference Center's 250-seat auditorium

Essentially, we must become a new company every three years."

Meetings focused on corporate innovation may find a fitting home at the reinvented Southbridge Hotel, then, with its reminders of a company that itself evolved over nearly two centuries. A grand white Italian marble staircase that used to be outside the AO executive offices remains, and the conference center reflects the AO spirit in its appropriately named Crystal Ballroom (4,500 square feet) and Prism Auditorium (250 seats), the latter offering dual screens that function independently of one another. The property offers a total of 24,000 square feet of meeting space.

Décor includes nods to the venue's visual roots as well. Visitors can find circles, cones, and rods in carpets, on walls, and in on-site eateries Visions Restaurant and its more casual counterpart Shades Lounge. Shadowboxes displayed near the meeting rooms are filled with artifacts from AO employees, including tools, game pieces, and, of course, glasses. Find more at the [**Southbridge Hotel & Conference Center Web site.**](#)

