

Home > This Week's Crain's > Focus >

## Second City . . . actually make that 10th

By Lisa Bertagnoli June 17, 2013

Print | Email | [Comments](#)

Civic pride: Chicago's got it in spades. World renown? Not so much.

Tourism numbers are up; **April's hotel occupancy rate** of 78.8 percent is the highest in the city's history. Yet Chicago, **which gets 46.2 million visitors a year**, remains 10th among American cities as a destination for foreigners.

The disconnect between perception and reality is creating

fascinating conversation. On one end, there's DePaul University professor Rachel Shteir, whose **negative portrayal of Chicago** in the April 18 New York Times Book Review caused a mini-tsunami of biting tweets, outraged comments and even **a letter to the editor** from Riccardo Muti, music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

On the other end, city officials want, and plan, to beef up tourism for the economy's sake. Mayor Rahm Emanuel's goal is to boost tourism to 50 million visitors a year by 2020. Part of the plan: a 12,000-seat arena and two new hotels (and perhaps a casino) near McCormick Place. Mr. Emanuel swears the arena would increase convention and tourism business; the plan is attracting as many raised eyebrows as Ms. Shteir's book review.

**See a larger version of the image above**

Meanwhile, Choose Chicago, the tourism office that replaced the Chicago Convention and Tourism Bureau and the Chicago Office of Tourism and Culture, has a new chair in Johnson Publishing Co. CEO Desiree Rogers. The office has opened nine tourism bureaus overseas in hopes of evangelizing Chicago's charms to international visitors, who spend more and stay longer than their domestic counterparts.

Crain's talked to a wide range of observers—from the mayor to a hotel concierge to the head of New York's theater scene—about what Chicago needs to do to boost tourism beyond its domestic audience and polish its global image. The consensus: Chicago has fine museums, classical music, opera, architecture and restaurants. It also has traffic problems, an inefficient public transportation system and an underused lakefront.

### BIG IDEAS

"The city could be an incredible beacon if you just light it up. What does New York have—that ridiculous Times Square? It draws you to it. It sounds silly, but we respect our buildings so much, maybe it's time to start having fun with them. Light this place up—make it a magical place to come to. Like Oz." —**Michael Kutza**, founder and artistic director, Chicago International Film Festival  
"Chicago spends far too much time worrying about its reputation and actively trying to



TOP U.S. CITIES FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS, BY MARKET SHARE



court tourism. It has to concentrate more on the people who are living there now. Schools. Public transportation. Traffic. Crime. Those need to be focused on more than ad campaigns or getting big-box stores in." — **Adam Langer**, author of "Crossing California" and the forthcoming "The Salinger Contract," a former Rogers Park resident now living in New York "Instead of trying to create a picture-perfect image, the city should focus on this motley, gritty, joyous reality of it. That's what we need to tell the world: Chicago is a real place, with its own contradictions, joys and occasional dangers." — **Philip Barash**, creative marketing director, Forum Studio, Chicago "We need to dispel the perception that Chicago is a violent city. I deal with a lot of people in the U.K. and elsewhere. They say, 'I can't believe all the shootings.' It's beginning to overshadow all the amazing things that are here." — **Ashley Wheeler**, artistic director, Joffrey Ballet, Chicago "One thing we should do is stop bragging. The truth is we have a fantastic arts scene, shopping, sports, architecture and more. But when we characterize it as 'the best,' we lose credibility. There are plenty of wonderful things all over America. So let's just be part of that and not feel compelled to win first prize. And please, please, please banish forever the term 'world class' from any and all promotion. Any city that has to call itself 'world class' isn't. Can you imagine people in New York or Paris calling their city 'world class'?" — **Geoffrey Baer**, producer and program host, WTTW-TV/Channel 11, Chicago "When people, even from other places in the United States, come to Chicago, they say, 'This is a great city, but I don't get these unspoken lines.' They don't understand why there's not more integration between these different groups of people. The truth is, why are things so segregated? We still need to do more to integrate our city. We can do it. We are going to have to invest in and value all neighborhoods equally, and that's going to take a lot of work." — **Cornelius Johnson**, artistic director, South Shore Opera Company of Chicago "Be more open to controversy, be open to a discussion. Mayor Emanuel's idea for a Great Fire festival along the river walk next year is a good idea. Symbolic fireballs floating down the river—that's something different. That's what Chicago needs—more creativity like that." — **Jay Baldrige**, chef concierge, Trump International Hotel & Tower, Chicago

**CULTURE** .....

"It would be great if the city would create a mobile app that covered Chicago's cultural scene—to put the date of availability into that app and be told what was available that day. It would allow people . . . to understand we have a fantastic array of culture and arts activities. It's really that collective impact that a mobile app would celebrate." — **Anthony Freud**, general director, Lyric Opera of Chicago "We have this weird ambivalence for the 1920s and '30s because of gangsterism. But it's a draw. There is incredible culture here of the '20s and '30s that can be celebrated. The Chicago Architecture Foundation's art deco tour is one of their most sold-out, consistently. That's proof that this era is appreciated internationally." — **Keith Bringe**, director, Chicago Art Deco Survey "I think Chicago is a festival city, and the more it can have, the better. People travel for festivals. The most incredible festival in the world is in Edinburgh, Scotland (the Edinburgh International Festival, featuring music, dance, opera and theater, Aug. 9-Sept. 1 this year). It was a village in the '40s, and now it's a prime destination for international travelers. Chicago is well-positioned to create that high-level excitement. We have to make sure there's a joint vision." — **George Lepauw**, president and artistic director, International Beethoven Project, Chicago "Lyric Opera, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Art Institute and the many fine theaters are the equals of their counterparts in capitals around the globe. But, sadly, Chicago's world-class, vibrant arts scene is a 'best-kept secret' outside Chicago. For me, the key . . . is just sharing our fabulous productions with the rest of the world." — **Renee Fleming**, creative consultant, Lyric Opera of Chicago



**TRANSPORTATION** .....

"Developing a world-class transportation system would be the No. 1 thing to boost tourism and economic development. We have a strong backbone here, but there are a lot of places we could be more visionary. Warm places to wait? Wi-Fi on trains? Buses that go to the trains? There are cities that have these things." — **Erin Aleman**, principal planner, Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning "In the past the city had a free trolley. A lot of tourists used that; it was a way to save money when they came to Chicago. It went away with the budget cuts, and they should bring it back." — **Edward Cephus**, Streetwise vendor, Chicago "Traffic is pretty bad, and that's a major concern. Every day, the traffic is an hour or more from O'Hare to downtown—coming back, also. I don't know if they can do something—carpooling, or an express lane to get from O'Hare to downtown faster." — **Cornel Grama**, driver, Uber Chicago

**DINING AND SHOPPING** .....

"When I go to Chicago, I don't shop. I feel there's nothing for me, who wants something different and cool.

There has to be an area people can go to—a shopping area nobody's talking about. I know the store that Michelle Obama shopped at (Ikram, on East Huron Street) is there. Maybe access to blogs, or more articles about it?" —**Wendy Olsoff**, co-owner, P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York



"We need to put together an ad that promotes Chicago dining. I have seen other cities do it that can't hold a candle to Chicago. We have so many big names and iconic restaurants. Let's put together some beautiful film that shows that." —**Kevin Boehm**, co-founder, Boka Restaurant Group (Boka, Girl & the Goat, GT Fish & Oyster, Perennial Vrant and others), Chicago "We should have some sort of culinary wine and food festival on the higher end. I'm not talking about Taste of Chicago. I'm talking about what Aspen (Colo.) did. They made a huge deal out of it. It took them 10-plus years to make it into a phenomenal brand, but the best of the best of the country, and international, go to the Aspen Food and Wine Festival. They open the best bottles of wine. There are phenomenal seminars. It attracts a huge amount of guests with deep pockets." —**Attila Gyulai**, director, Embeya restaurant, Chicago

## BEYOND THE LOOP

"It's not only what the city of Chicago boasts but what it boasts in its regional communities. We have a partnership with Ravinia Festival, Chicago Botanic Gardens, Writers Theatre and Kohl Children's Museum called Do North. The idea is that here are these four institutions easy to get to from the city, by train or car, and you have access to myriad family activities. I'd love to see another group form in the western suburbs, with Brookfield Zoo and the Morton Arboretum, so we can give tourists more options. It's not just the city—it's what goes on beyond the city." —**Sheridan Turner**, president and CEO, Kohl Children's Museum, Glenview

"When the city of Chicago created Millennium Park, that was a game changer for the entire city because it was a remarkable public space. It drove tourism; it changed people's perception of the city. The city has to create remarkable public spaces and remarkable attractions throughout that space." —**Scott Greenberg**, developer, Wt Hotel, Chicago "I would like the neighborhoods to get their own marketing budgets and advertising buys."

—**Stephanie Sack**, owner, Vive la Femme women's apparel store, Bucktown, and president, Wicker Park Bucktown Chamber of Commerce "I think a lot of tourism promotion is focused on places and things that true Chicagoans do not really frequent. We are so much more than Michigan Avenue. There are countless little Chicago neighborhoods with restaurants, vintage shops and markets all their own. It is easy to get lost in Andersonville, or Wicker Park, or even the West Loop, discovering everything each area has to offer. The craft brew scene in Chicago is also next to none. I have heard many people talk about the city as a true 'foodie' destination, and it is just that . . . especially in the summer with a block party around every corner." —**Stephanie Izard**, chef-proprietor, Girl & the Goat, Little Goat Diner, Chicago



## THEATER

"There's so many wonderful small theater companies in the

There are so many wonderful small theater companies in the neighborhoods that could benefit by having audiences made up of people from out of town. Maybe hotels could package some of the smaller black-box theaters with hotel rooms." — **Jonathan Fine**, executive director, Preservation Chicago "The fact that there are over 200 theaters in Chicago, let alone commercial theater, is tremendous. All the infrastructure for theater as a calling card is there. The vibrancy of the theater community there and the vibrancy of material that originates in Chicago is a great story to tell." — **Nick Scandalios**, executive vice president, Nederlander Organization, and chairman, Broadway League Inc., New York The Chicago Theatre "marquee is on every bit of literature about the city. But it doesn't say anything about the city. It's owned by a New York company (Madison Square Garden Co.)! We should emphasize Goodman, Steppenwolf, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Those are unique to Chicago and would bring people to Chicago." — **Brett Batterson**, executive director, Auditorium Theatre of Roosevelt University, Chicago



**GETTING THE WORD OUT** .....

"I have two ideas. One is signage in multiple languages at the airport. When you arrive in a city that makes you welcome, you can navigate based on your own language. That's important. The other thing: We have one of the most visible mayors in the United States, in the world. We are anxious to get him on the road to also tell the story of Chicago with us." — **Don Welsh**, president and CEO, Choose Chicago "We should employ our artists and cultural organizations as ambassadors for the city. When our great institutions travel the globe, they're carrying the banner for the city of Chicago." — **Ra Joy**, executive director, Arts Alliance Illinois "People comment on what a beautiful, clean city this is. I think the city needs to pitch that more and let people know that." — **Michael Borgstrom**, president, Wendella Sightseeing Co., Chicago "Amp up what is here and do a better job of telling the world what an extraordinary experience they get when they visit here." — **Tony Karman**, president and director, ExpoChicago, the International Exposition of Contemporary and Modern Art



"When corporate executives visit a country, we should have tagging along with that group the folks boosting for our tourism and convention economy, so they can make a pitch to those officials who are making economic development decisions. Those are the folks who are the portal for their C-suite executives. They can help us evangelize, get the word out." — **Brendan Reilly**, alderman, 42nd Ward

**THE WATERFRONTS** .....

"What we're missing is more outdoor living, using the city outdoors, besides the places like Millennium Park. I feel the lake is underutilized from a hospitality point of view. Montrose Beach or Belmont Harbor—there are hundreds of things happening there. Soccer, boats, paddleboarders. You can get a hotdog or fries, but there are no real amenities. There's all that lake, and it's underutilized." — **Karen Herold**, vice president of design, 555 International Inc., a Chicago-based restaurant design firm

"We should keep working toward making the Chicago River our next waterfront by cleaning it up and creating new public spaces along it that we can all enjoy." — **Jeanne Gang**, founder and principal, Studio Gang Architects, Chicago "We have a very long stretch of beach that has no food or beverage services of any quality. In many European locales, the city puts up a series of identical buildings that have showers on the outside and small



changing areas, and an outdoor section to the bar area. "Because each of these is identical, small and fit well into the area



architecturally, they are not an eyesore. They would then be leased to various operators who are chosen for their diversity of products, previous success and willingness to bid on a percentage of gross revenue that goes to the city. The city can regulate operating hours. "This would enliven our beachfront in the evenings for strolls along the bike and running paths and provide a low-risk way to both increase services along the lakefront and increase revenue to the city." — **Nick**

**Kokonas**, co-owner, with chef Grant Achatz, of Next and Alinea restaurants, Chicago "Chicago is a work of art in itself, if we consider its architectural assets. That has to be highlighted. Navy Pier is a vantage point to look at the skyline, but not enough tourists know how to get the overall vision of the city. From Navy Pier, you can get that. At present, it's used for benefit of residents of the city. There's not much of an effort to use it as a place to admire the city as a work of art. How to make Navy Pier as a place to contemplate Chicago as a work of art?" — **Silvio Marchetti**, a native of Rome and director of the Italian Cultural Institute, Chicago

---