

**Report to the ASOR Board
Location of the ASOR Annual Meeting: 2021, 2022, 2023**

**Susan Ackerman
ASOR President
November 2019**

**I. The Challenges of Meeting with SBL
in 2021 (San Antonio), 2022 (Denver), and 2023 (San Antonio)**

During its Spring 2019 meeting, the ASOR Board voted that ASOR will make all reasonable efforts to meet in its current time frame (Wednesday to Saturday pattern) and in the same city as SBL, except in years when meeting in the same city is not reasonable or economically feasible. After extensive and exhaustive searching, we have determined that meeting in the same city is neither reasonable or economically feasible for 2021 (San Antonio), 2022 (Denver), or 2023 (San Antonio).

More specifically, for 2021: we conducted an extensive search for hotels in San Antonio, the greater San Antonio area, other major cities in Texas (Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, and Houston), as well as New Orleans. After site visits in May of 2019 by Andy Vaughn and Richard Coffman (see Susan Ackerman memo to the Board of Trustees, dated June 4, 2019; attached), it was determined that ASOR did not have viable options for meeting in or around San Antonio. We also did not receive any proposals from New Orleans. We did receive some proposals from Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, and Houston, but in Dallas and Fort Worth, the room rates we were offered and required food and beverage minimums were very high, and in Austin, according to Arlene Press, our Director of Meetings and Events, the prices we were quoted were "really outrageous."

There was one potentially viable property available in Houston, the Hyatt Regency, but the price was not great, and, according to our Board Chair, Richard Coffman, who is from Houston and (in his words) knows it "like the back of my hand," the Hyatt is somewhat isolated and it's a bit of a hike to the hopping areas downtown (it's on the west side of downtown and the happening areas are on the east side). Moreover, to get from the Hyatt to other hopping areas in the Heights, Midtown, Montrose, Washington Avenue, Rice Village, and the Galleria would require is a taxi or an Uber ride.

Finally, we heard from members who asked us to keep in mind the California law that restricts the use of State General Funds to pay for travel costs to states that have laws that discriminate based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, or to states that have passed a law repealing such protections. Texas is one of the eleven states to which this law pertains, and the law specifically identifies California's state colleges and universities as subject to its provisions. Our members were thus concerned that this California law could preclude ASOR members at California state schools from attending a Texas-based meeting.

For 2022: ASOR worked with our partners in the Denver Convention and Visitor's Bureau (CVB) and hotel representatives to look at every possibility for meeting downtown, and they confirmed that there is no availability. We also discussed new downtown hotels that will be completed by November 2022, but they are boutique hotels that will not accommodate ASOR's Annual Meeting. ASOR did not look at the Denver Marriott Tech Center (2018) or other hotels near the airport and outside of downtown because we had very low attendance for our 2018 Denver meeting (the lowest since 2010; see the list of attendance figures for the last ten years below) and because of the feedback we received from attendees that the Denver Marriott Tech Center felt isolated.

For 2023: ASOR explored all options for meeting in downtown San Antonio with our CVB and hotel contacts. There is no availability, and the new hotel being built by the convention center may not be completed in time. We did not source other cities in Texas again since we had just sourced them for 2021 and the proposals were not financially viable. Overall, we determined that in terms of cost, we could do better in cities that would have a greater draw for our members than possible venues in Texas.

II. Exploring Options Beyond San Antonio (2021), Denver (2022), and San Antonio (2023)

In years when we cannot meet in the same city as SBL, the Board directed ASOR to find a venue that "best serves the greatest number of its constituencies." In order to best serve the needs of ASOR constituents who are also SBL members (15-20% of ASOR AM attendees are also SBL members [this includes many Israeli attendees]), and also to serve the needs of constituents coming from overseas, we decided to search for venues in East Coast or Midwest cities that have international airports that offer non-stop flights to the SBL meeting cities. We also prioritized locations where we could meet downtown, with good proximity to restaurants, museums, universities, etc. We did not consider Canadian cities, even though cities such as Montreal and Toronto met our list of criteria, because the cost to ASOR would be high, as it is very expensive to ship our goods to Canada and customs is a difficulty. The hotel contracts are also difficult from a budgetary standpoint, because either we would take a financial risk because of the fluctuating value of the Canadian dollar or we would have to book at a premium guaranteeing payment in US dollars. Finally, other learned societies have reported that their attendance has dropped in years they have met in Canadian cities.

We thus focused our search on Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C. area, Atlanta, and Chicago.

For 2021: Arlene and Andy have visited three properties in Chicago, and Andy has visited three properties in Washington, D.C. (Crystal City), two properties in New York, and two properties in Philadelphia. He has attended several meetings at the Baltimore property in the past, so he knows that hotel fairly well. Andy and Arlene also already know the properties in Atlanta well, so those visits are not the highest priority. In addition, the feedback from the Program Committee and CCC (see further below) was to rank Atlanta lower than the other cities.

The upshot for 2021 is that ASOR has four proposals from Chicago (three downtown, one at an airport hotel); one from Baltimore; one from Philadelphia; two from Washington, D.C./Arlington (Crystal City); one from Boston; three from Atlanta; and two from New York. Initial room block prices range from \$169 (in Atlanta, and airport hotels in Chicago) to \$269 (in New York City) with Food & Beverage (F&B) commitments ranging from \$25,000 (in New York City and Chicago downtown/convention center) to \$50,000 (in Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Chicago downtown). We have found that these prices can improve greatly once we enter into negotiations, both preliminary and final. Andy received feedback from New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Arlington that leads him to conclude that we could have final proposals in those venues at a cost well under \$200 per room.

For 2022: ASOR has four proposals from Chicago; one from Baltimore; two from Philadelphia; three from Washington DC/Arlington; two from Atlanta; two from Boston; and two from New York. Room block prices and F&B are similar to 2021.

For 2023: ASOR has two proposals from Baltimore; two from Philadelphia; one from Washington (Crystal City); and one from New York City. Boston and Chicago both have city-wide events over our exact days in 2023, and we thus have no proposals from those cities.

III. Advice from the Program Committee and the Chairs Coordinating Council

In order to ensure that we have a good place to meet, and in order to ensure the best possible contract, ASOR needs to sign contracts by December 31, 2019, if possible. We have sought the advice of the Program Committee and the Chairs Coordinating Council and now deliver that advice to the Board for consideration at the Board's November 2019 meeting.

Advice from the Program Committee: In its discussion, the Program Committee considered how the venue of the meeting might enhance the academic program, because of access to museums, universities, and other cultural institutions that might be particularly interesting to and enrich the meeting for our attendees. The Program Committee particularly highlighted the opportunity to visit the OI, if we were to meet in Chicago, and the opportunity to visit the Penn Museum in Philadelphia. The Program Committee indicated, however, that proximity to these cultural institutions was important, meaning airport hotels were not desirable.

In addition, the Program Committee suggested that being in the same city two years in a row would be a negative, meaning that Boston did not seem a viable candidate for 2021 (since we will be meeting there in 2020). Boston in 2022 also felt a little "soon" to return, and it is also the case that availability in Boston in 2022 is limited. Generally, the Program Committee was not enthusiastic about being in the same city in alternating years.

Based on these considerations, the Program Committee developed a three-tier list:

Top-tier: New York (if it were possible to get a room rate of under \$200/night); Chicago (not airport); Philadelphia

Middle-tier: Washington, D.C., area, Baltimore

Lowest-tier: Atlanta, Boston

Advice from the Chairs Coordinating Council: The CCC basically concurred with the Program Committee's advice, adding the following observations:

- It would be nice to meet in the Washington, D.C., area reasonably soon, so that members could visit ASOR's new home, the James F. Strange Center, in Alexandria. Meeting in Washington, D.C., also offers ASOR some cost-savings, in terms of staff travel and shipping costs.
- Meeting in Chicago in 2022 would be appealing to those also hoping to attend the SBL meeting, as there are multiple (and, at least currently, fairly inexpensive) direct flights from Chicago to Denver. Meeting in Chicago in 2022 would also put ASOR on an East Coast-Midwest-East Coast schedule for 2021-2023, which is better than two East Coast locations in a row.
- Even with a hotel rate of under \$200/night, New York City can still be very expensive. The hotel tax is currently 14.75%, plus a flat fee of \$3.50 USD per day. Moreover, while the hotels we are considering (the Hilton and the Sheraton) are easily (and cheaply) accessible from JFK (via the E-train), they are not as easily (or cheaply) accessed from LaGuardia. That said, plane fares to NYC are cheap, which might mitigate other costs in the minds of some attendees, and it was felt that NYC might be a particular draw for international scholars.
- Depending on the hotel location, restaurants can be hard to find in Philadelphia, especially on the weekends.

Charge to the Board: As we did in consulting the Program Committee and the CCC, we seek the *advice* of the Board, to be used by our Executive Director Andy Vaughn and Arlene Press, our Director of Meetings and Events, in negotiations going forward. However, because Andy and Arlene need some flexibility as they enter into these negotiations, and the ability to juggle various options based on price, the venue's desirability, etc., the Board *should not* move to make any hard-and-fast decisions that tie Andy's and Arlene's hands.

IV. Additional Data

In order to help the Board think about these possibilities, I offer a few additional points of information:

(1) The SBL schedule for 2020-2031

2020: Boston (ASOR will also be in Boston, at the Westin Boston Waterfront)
2021: San Antonio
2022: Denver
2023: San Antonio
2024: San Diego
2025: Boston
2026: Denver
2027: Washington, DC
2028: Boston
2029: San Antonio
2030: San Diego
2031: Washington, DC

(2) Some attendance figures for recent meetings:

2009: New Orleans	601
2010: Atlanta	686
2011: San Francisco	816
2012: Chicago	921
2013: Baltimore	932
2014: San Diego	936
2015: Atlanta	877
2016: San Antonio	881
2017: Boston	1148
2018: Denver	807

(3) Some room rates and F&B rates for recent and future meetings:

2014: San Diego	\$139/\$25,000
2015: Atlanta	\$149/\$19,000
2016: San Antonio	\$159/\$25,000
2017: Boston	\$182/\$25,000
2018: Denver	\$149/\$25,000
2019: San Diego	\$159/\$28,000
2020: Boston	\$189/\$32,000

(4) Some relevant results regarding "location" from the April 2019 report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of the Annual Meeting, including data from the February 2019 survey of ASOR members

Summary Statement: The Host City of the AM (Annual Meeting) is a factor for most Survey respondents. Seventy-five percent of respondents indicated that the Host City plays some role in their choice to attend or not (Very Important 23.9%, Usually 24.9%, Sometimes 26.4%) and yet about 63% reported they have chosen to attend every year (44.9%) or most years

(17.7%). Additionally, about 27% (158/570) of responders said that proximity to another professional meeting was an important factor. Ease and cost of travel were primary concerns for city choice (ca 75% each) while local attractions (36%) and location and weather (34%) play a smaller but still significant role. Regarding the hotel choice, clearly the main three concerns (ca 66% each) deal with getting around (to local restaurants, the airport, public transit) and cost. Free WiFi and having all ASOR meetings in one hotel were also important factors (ca 40% each). About 75% of respondents indicate they would be at least ‘likely’ to book a room in an ASOR conference hotel. In both of the above – city and hotel - it is clear that transportation and cost were the significant factors.

Supporting data:

How important has the location (Host City) of the Annual Meeting been to you (the Hotel is treated separately below)? (569 responses)

1- Very Important (always makes a difference for my attendance)	23.9
2- Usually Important (usually makes a difference for my attendance)	24.9
3- Somewhat Important (sometimes makes a difference for my attendance)	26.4
4- Rarely Important (rarely makes a difference for my attendance)	12.7
5- Not Important (seldom or never makes a difference for my attendance)	12.7

Please rank your 3 top preferences for the following factors in choosing a Host City (570 responses)

Ease of travel	421 (73.9%)
Cost of travel	438 (76.8)
Safety	50 (8.8)
Local Attractions (museums, amusements, historical sites, etc)	206 (36.1)
Functional local public transportation	125 (21.9)
Nightlife	20 (3.5)
Proximity to another professional meeting	158 (27.7)
Location and Weather	194 (34)

Please rank your 4 preferences for the following factors in choosing a Conference Hotel (570 responses)

Walking distance to diverse local restaurants (fast food to fine dining)	375 (65.8)
Ease of local travel (Airport shuttle, local public transit)	376 (66)
Proximity to another professional meeting	138 (24.2)
Free in-room Wi-Fi	233 (40.9)
Amenities (Fitness center, newspaper)	21 (3.7)
Cost	370 (64.9)
Clean, comfortable, modern rooms	177 (31.1)
Space for receptions and special dinners	12 (4.6)
Walking distance to “downtown” and nightlife	152 (26.7)
Option for extending the stay at conference price session and business meeting rooms in the hotel	26 (4.6) All
Free Coffee at breaks	234 (41.1)
Free snacks and coffee for business meetings	49 (8.6)
	13 (2.3)

Memo: San Antonio Hotels for 2021
Susan Ackerman to ASOR Board of Trustees, June 4, 2019

Dear Board Colleagues,

Greetings, and I write with some follow-up news regarding our plans for the Annual Meeting in November 2021. As many of you remember, we heard, just before our April Board meeting, that hotel space had opened up in downtown San Antonio at the Wyndham San Antonio Riverwalk, after a convention that had been scheduled for that hotel pulled out.

In late May, our Executive Director, Andy Vaughn, and our Board Chair, Richard Coffman, made a trip to San Antonio to visit the Wyndham and inspect its facilities. While in San Antonio, they also visited the JW Marriott Hill Country Resort.

Unfortunately, the news from that site visit is not very positive. The Wyndham has several liabilities that make it unacceptable for our purposes. First, we are concerned that our members may not find it comfortable to stay there. Both Andy and Richard had significant complaints about cleanliness and service. More important: they had concerns about safety. The Wyndham is “on the Riverwalk” in the sense that it is on a part of the Riverwalk that is described as being “up and coming.” But it seems clear that the neighborhood is not yet there. Andy described the Riverwalk near the Wyndham as isolated, and while there is some lighting, it is not a place where Andy would feel comfortable walking at night unless he were with a group. Andrea of the San Antonio Visitor’s Bureau (our San Antonio contact) implied, moreover, that she would not walk there at night even with a group. Rather, she cautioned that at night, guests should take cabs or Ubers from the hotel to the restaurants and bars on the Riverwalk or anywhere else — and perhaps should take cabs or Ubers during the day too. In addition, one of the city’s main homeless shelters is close to the hotel, and there are said to be homeless people coming and going along the street, particularly later at night. This could make some of our members feel uneasy or uncomfortable.

Also, the hotel doesn’t really have the space we need. The meeting rooms are too small for what we anticipate in terms of attendance, and the hotel will only offer 300 sleeping rooms for our peak nights, whereas we need at least 350, and we’d like to have 400. So people would have to lodge at overflow hotels, yet because safety is a concern, this becomes problematic. Even for people staying at the hotel: the hotel would be overwhelmed in terms of public spaces (bars, restaurants), and attendees would have to go elsewhere. Again, because safety is a concern, this is problematic. Furthermore, while Andy reports that there are some great restaurants close to the hotel, two of them are just breakfast and lunch places — so it’s not clear if there are places our members could go for a nearby dinner.

As for the JW Marriott Hill Country Resort: it has many of the pluses that the resort at La Cantera offered when we met in San Antonio in 2016 — a beautiful property, scrupulously maintained, with gorgeous facilities. Indeed, according to Andy and Richard, it is even more gorgeous than La Cantera. But as opposed to La Cantera, there’s no nearby mall, so if one leaves the hotel, it’s a mandatory Uber ride of at least \$10-\$15 to get anywhere else. And to get to downtown is further still, and a longer trip than it was to reach downtown from La Cantera. So

it's isolated, and to contract there would just be to open ourselves up to more of the negative feedback that we received in 2016 regarding the isolated La Cantera.

The upshot is that while we will still keep our ear to the ground regarding San Antonio possibilities for 2021, we're starting to look elsewhere. Andy and Arlene Press, our Director of Meetings and Events, have developed a new "Request for Proposals" that they will be circulating to possible venues soon. We will aim to keep you apprised of our progress, although, as we have all learned, these things don't happen fast.

I know the Board expressed a strong preference at its April meeting that ASOR meet in the same city as SBL, and I am grateful for all that Andy, Richard, and Arlene have done to try to make that preference a reality in 2021. I am sorry to have to report to you that, as things stand, we have not been able to make San Antonio work.

As always, all my best,
Susan