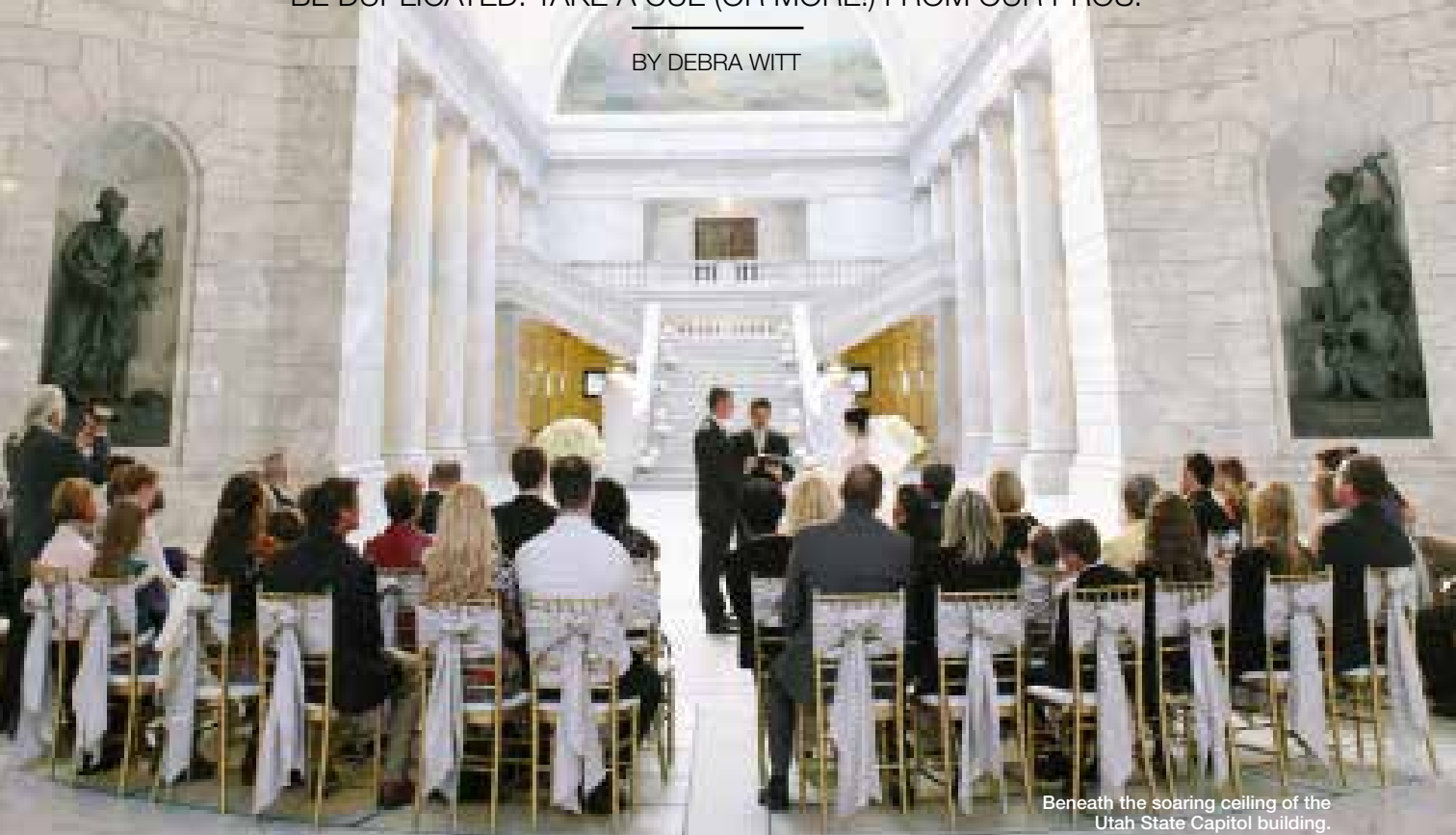


SINGULAR SENSATIONS

THE SECRET TO A WEDDING CELEBRATION UNLIKE ANY OTHER? AN UNEXPECTED LOCATION AND DETAILS SO PERSONAL THEY CAN'T BE DUPLICATED. TAKE A CUE (OR MORE!) FROM OUR PROS.

BY DEBRA WITT



Beneath the soaring ceiling of the Utah State Capitol building.



An elegant wedding at the Detroit Institute of the Arts.

Elegant ballrooms, shabby-chic farms and picturesque country clubs will forever hold their place as prime spots for wedding receptions. (Tried-and-true traditions are always in style.) But increasingly, couples are choosing venues that aren't obvious first choices. Think art galleries, vintage movie theaters, rooftop hideaways, kids' campsites, breweries, even landmark business and government buildings that ooze character.

"A growing number of brides and grooms want their weddings to feel truly personal. They want to share with their guests the places and things that they love," says Kindra Browne, owner of Simple Elegance in Kansas City, KS and Seattle, WA.

"If you think about it, most great love stories begin with a meaningful location," adds Alison Laesser-Keck, creative director of VLD Events in southeast Michigan and Santa Barbara, CA. "So it only makes sense for couples to return to treasured spots for their special day."

With that in mind, we asked top wedding planners from across the country to share their best advice for couples who are inspired to stage their celebrations off the beaten path. ➔



Atop a roof in Chicago, with the Sears Tower in the background.

PHOTOGRAPHY: OPPOSITE PAGE) PEPPER NIX PHOTOGRAPHY; (THIS PAGE FROM TOP) JILL DEVRIES PHOTOGRAPHY; ANN & KAM PHOTOGRAPHY & CINEMA



A sweetheart table at the Shedd Aquarium.



Aquatic table decor.

for a reception at Chicago's famous Shedd Aquarium, designed by Miranda Tassi for Chancey Charm Weddings. But a few key elements made the evening feel intimate, says founder Sarah Chancey. A custom gobo lighting feature defined the main party space. Meanwhile, in the dining area, tables were tightly clustered around the show-stopping fish tank to foster lively conversation. "It's great if you can find a fabulous and unique space," she says, "but you still want your guests to recognize that they're at a wedding."

DRUM UP EXCITEMENT

The final step is to come up with creative ways to call your guests' attention to what makes the spot special to you. "The invitation suite is the best way to get guests excited," says Chancey. One couple she recently worked with wanted to celebrate all things Atlanta, so the focal point of their invitation was a hand-drawn map of the city. That same illustration was



Late-night treats.



Boiled peanuts are a Georgia specialty.

enlarged and framed to greet guests at the reception, where dinner napkins were stamped "From Atlanta With Love."

Invites for Jove Meyer's campground couple were inspired by a classic summer camp craft—paper stamping—and included a well-thought itinerary of activities for the entire weekend, as well as a tongue-in-cheek "survival guide" with fun facts about the couple and the area.

Welcome bags and favors are two simple ways to tell your story. For a couple who got married at Detroit's Piquette Plant, better known as the "birthplace of the Model T," Laesser-Keck helped them

put together a "Made in Michigan" welcome kit filled with local treats. Similarly, the Atlanta couple surprised hungry partiers with hot boiled peanuts—a Georgia specialty—and sent guests home with "peppermints from the peach state."

Food and drink are other easy ways to pull everything together. Along those lines, the designers at 42 North Weddings suggest serving food and beverages that are either local to the area or from a special occasion the couple spent together.

"It's the little details that will really make the day something you and your guests won't forget," says Laesser-Keck. ■

Pros and Cons of Non-Traditional Spaces

PRO: Many sites that aren't typically used for weddings have few to no restrictions, providing couples the opportunity to take risks with their decor and theme, and the freedom to use vendors of their own choosing.

CON: The site manager may not have enough (or any) event experience to help tie up the small, yet crucial, details, like adequate

restrooms and parking spaces, or meeting the technical needs of your caterer and videographer. DIY couples should prepare to be more hands on in the early staging steps—get started by bookmarking our "Top Questions to Ask Your Wedding Vendors" at bridalguide.com/vendors.

PRO: Frequently the rental costs of non-traditional spaces are

lower than venues that market themselves as event spaces.

CON: Often other unexpected costs erase any savings—you may need a catering tent, a portable restroom, or even a private security detail to oversee certain areas (as at a museum).

PRO: Inviting guests to festivities that are off the beaten wedding path practically guarantees you'll

score big fun- and wow-factor points. That's because everything will feel new and exciting.

CON: There are more pitfalls you'll have to dodge to pull everything off without a hitch (see previous cons). This is the time to consider hiring a planner or day-of coordinator to make sure you cover each and every last detail with minimal stress.