

By nearly any measure, the scale of CityCenter is breathtaking. It is a shimmering cascade of curving glass and artful angles, iconic design and sustainable development that expands the field. Within the immense complex on The Strip are six glamorous buildings designed by eight world-renowned architects, 500,000 square feet of luxury retail and entertainment space and the first major public art collection in Las Vegas.

ICON IN THE MAKING

An inside look at the inspiration for CityCenter

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Seeking no less than to expand the city's vocabulary, redefine its global status and launch the next stage in its evolution, CityCenter – the largest privately funded real estate development in the history of the United States at \$8.5 billion – arrives at a crucial moment in the life of both Las Vegas and America.

The inspiration for this ambitious development was both complex and very, very simple.

Jim Murren, CEO of MGM MIRAGE, loves cities. This is no recently acquired interest; in 1982, as an art history and urban studies major in college, he spent a semester in Rome studying the subject for his senior thesis. He continued to expand his real-world study of city life during his 14 years in Manhattan.

Fast forward to 2003, after living in Las Vegas for five years Murren “was intrigued by its very existence. It’s the largest metropolitan market in the United States founded since World War II. It has more than 2 million people and is such a rapidly growing community that it has fallen short of where it wants to be; there is suburban sprawl and little thought given to urban planning, mass transportation and smart development.”

Murren believed that Las Vegas could create a better urban lifestyle, a view formed by his educational passions and

personal experience in other great cities. He began to wonder what MGM MIRAGE could do with 67 acres of prized land between Bellagio and Monte Carlo.

At first, he recalled, “we threw out ideas about building a traditional casino hotel but that seemed somewhat underwhelming and certainly not groundbreaking.” This thought sparked the discussion about a landmark project that could be transformative in the life of Las Vegas by enhancing its global importance and expanding its appeal as an international destination.

“I started thinking about what we could create as a counterpoint to the suburban life that we have,” Murren said. “Could we go back to the roots of urban planning and design a neighborhood from a smart urban-planning perspective? I really believe people will gravitate toward higher art and architecture.”

Months before he introduced any ideas to the MGM MIRAGE board of directors, Murren began shaping his goals in “kick-around meetings” including those with Bill Smith, head of MGM MIRAGE Design Group. The roots of what has become CityCenter can be found in his reflections on those early discussions.

“We needed urban density and simplicity of movement as well as little spaces such as small pocket parks or plazas. We also wanted to create a retail experience that was more





akin to SoHo than the Mall of America. We originally talked about creating residential areas to energize retail space since it’s so much fun to have people around day and night, to have people living on The Strip or, for some, having second homes there. We thought about water conservation and taking that to a whole new level. And finally, we wanted to expose people to compelling visual experiences since Las Vegas didn’t have an established fine art program or fine art museum, nor did we have the cultural venues that so many people in other cities take for granted.”

By 2004, the time had come for Murren to share his vision. Armed with boards that his design team had developed, he introduced the idea of building a city, or at least the nucleus of a city, at a board meeting. To his relief, the members were intrigued.

They decided to send Murren and Bobby Baldwin, CEO of CityCenter, to New York to interview urban planners who could develop the concept further. This included some of the world’s leading firms; Ehrenkrantz Eckstut & Kuhn was eventually chosen to forge the master plan.

The underlying vision was strong and clear. It was important that large buildings weren’t built right to the sidewalk, which would, in effect, create a visual barrier to The Strip. Instead, the aim was to create a sense of elevation where the buildings varied and increased in size as one moved into the project. This would help achieve a greater sense of space and a more pedestrian-friendly experience.

The planning also focused on bringing buildings closer together and improving the circulation of vehicles by moving as much underground as possible; creating an urban retail experience with residential units sprinkled around it; and placing the resort casino at the back of the complex to establish a compelling focal point.

With EE&K’s master plan in hand, Baldwin and a team of design executives began interviewing dozens of architects. After hundreds of presentations, Murren said, “we zeroed in on a group of world-class architects that fit with our vision of collaboration, sustainability and modernism in its purest form – something approachable and understandable.”

In the coming months, there would be a wedding of architects to specific buildings. Cesar Pelli and his firm, Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects, known for the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur and the World Financial Center and Winter Garden in New York, was an early choice to design the 61-story ARIA Resort & Casino; Helmut Jahn, honored for his iconic Sony Center in Berlin, was selected to design the purely residential Veer Towers; Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates, designer of the 101-story Shanghai World Financial Tower, for CityCenter’s Mandarin Oriental, Las Vegas; RV Architecture, LLC led by Rafael Viñoly, known for the Tokyo International Forum and Jazz at Lincoln Center, to design the 57-story

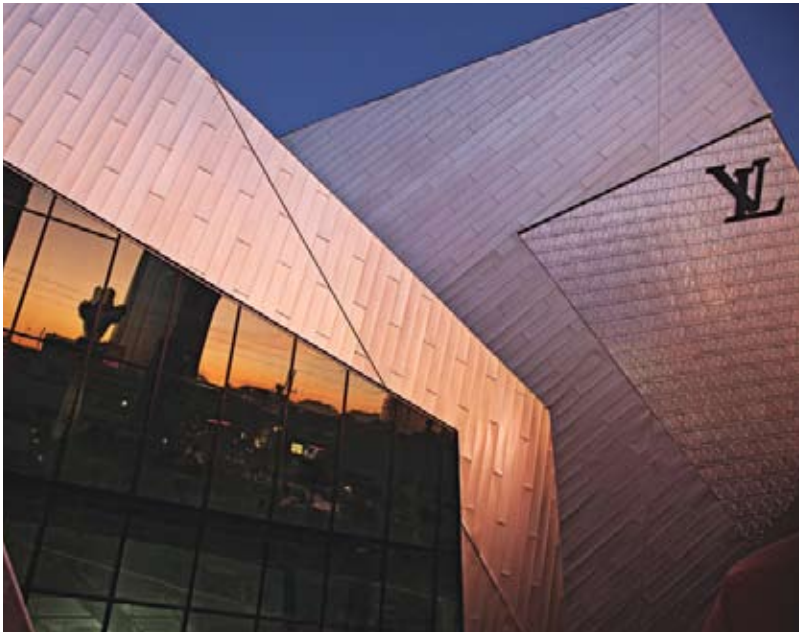
Vdara Hotel & Spa; Lord Norman Foster and his Foster + Partners, winner of the coveted Pritzker architecture prize, for The Harmon Hotel; Studio Daniel Libeskind, best known as the 2003 winner of the World Trade Center competition, for the high-end retail and entertainment district, Crystals; and David Rockwell and his innovative Rockwell Group were brought in to design the interior architecture of Crystals.

“We believed it was vital to make a very strong statement that this was not more of the same,” asserted Murren. “We’ve broken a lot of traditions and become very cutting-edge with design. We thought these firms, with offices around the world, would have the best feel for what’s important today and what would be relevant over the next 100 years.”



Not only did that mean employing new ideas for design and engineering, but also pushing hard for a development that is environmentally conscious. “We were already underway with sustainability in a more modest form,” Murren recalled. “But the architects said, ‘This is the future. If not Las Vegas, where? This is responsible; it’s smart.’”

That commitment has translated into what has become one of the world’s largest U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-certified (LEED) urban developments. Among the highlights: the most technologically advanced hotel rooms in the U.S.; a recycling operation that recycled or reused more than 230,000 tons of construction waste, including 90% of the imploded Boardwalk Hotel; a water conservation system that is expected to save 50 million gallons of water each year; an on-site energy generation





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— Jim Murren, CEO of MGM MIRAGE

plant; energy-efficient exterior features, including reflective rooftops and specially coated windows; and the introduction of green building techniques to the construction trades and crafts people, which can be implemented on subsequent developments.

Murren’s enthusiasm about this is palpable, both for what it means for urban development and CityCenter’s success. “We created an opportunity to change the way we think about development and expose or influence other people to do the same,” he said. “I already see the seeds of sustainability growing around our valley.”

He cites a recent energy summit in Las Vegas that attracted dozens of national politicians, including a former president, vice president, senators and governors. “We can lead the way in an area of national importance.” And he can see how sustainable design will enhance CityCenter’s appeal: “People will book their conferences and meetings with us because we are green.”

If the architects deepened Murren’s belief in the value of sustainability, he needed no prodding to include \$40 million of contemporary fine art at CityCenter – a permanent public collection to be enjoyed by visitors and shared with schools and the Las Vegas community.

Murren and a newly formed art committee pursued a combination of commissioned and acquired pieces that would be relevant to the surrounding environment and produced by significant contemporary artists who felt a kinship to sustainability. “Choosing the pieces for the CityCenter Fine Art Collection was one of the most fun aspects,” Murren said.

Maya Lin, best known for her Vietnam war memorial, created a dazzling new piece that hangs over the front desk of ARIA and uses approximately 3,700 pounds of reclaimed silver, representing the Colorado River. Henry

Moore’s stately sculpture “Reclining Connected Forms,” depicting a mother and child, sits in The Park between ARIA and Crystals. Nancy Rubins’ “Big Edge,” a wildly colorful and gravity-defying sculpture, was created from mostly recycled boats, canoes and kayaks. Richard Long’s “Earth” and “Circle of Life” earth, mud and clay drawings for Veer echoes the red rock mountains just outside the city. The collection also includes works from other leading artists such as Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, Frank Stella and Jenny Holzer.

Murren is particularly proud that CityCenter opened on schedule. “It was a tremendous logistical challenge,” he said, crediting Bobby Baldwin for his detail-minded organizational skills and ability to schedule and track an extraordinarily complex project that has involved hundreds of designers, more than a thousand subcontractors and nearly 10,000 construction trades and crafts people.

Looking ahead, Murren expects that CityCenter will be “a model for development around the world and a symbol of the rebirth of Las Vegas,” and that gives him great optimism about the future. “There are very few seeds of growth around the country that are tangible, but one of them is here – and the good news is that it’s a very big one,” he said. “After two years of decline, we think visitation in Las Vegas will increase and CityCenter will be the reason why.”

With its opening, CityCenter has already beaten the odds, expanding the sense of what is possible to achieve in a town built on taking risks. As for Murren, the man who decided to pursue his passion and dream big, he’s excited by the potential of CityCenter to inspire other like-minded developments. “I don’t think this is the last project we’ll do like this around the world,” he said. “I think it’s a starting point.”

