

CityCenter ups the stakes in Las Vegas

By Tom Uhlenbrock

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Cirque du Soleil, in partnership with Elvis Presley Enterprises, has produced Viva Elvis, a stage show at the Aria Resort & Casino. (By Tom Uhlenbrock/P-D)

LAS VEGAS — One of the city's famous faces was among the preview crowd wandering wide-eyed through the lobby of the Aria Resort & Casino, the showpiece of the new CityCenter, the most extravagant megaresort in Las Vegas history.

"It's beyond belief; it's so awesome you can't take it all in," said Siegfried Fischbacher, the blond partner of the Siegfried & Roy tiger-and-illusion show

that performed for almost five decades. In a wheelchair at his side was his dark-haired partner, Roy Horn, who was injured by one of the tigers in 2003, closing the long-running act.

"The city has been on kind of a roller-coaster," Fischbacher said. "This is going to bring new life to Las Vegas."

Even in a city with its own Eiffel Tower, Great Pyramid and Venetian canal, CityCenter is an audacious array of art and architecture. With a price tag of \$8.5 billion, the largest privately funded project in U.S. history, the complex of buildings on 67 acres next to the Bellagio on The Strip is a high-stakes bet that nearly folded.

"We had a very near-death experience" is how Bill McBeath, president and chief operating officer of Aria, put it. The project was conceived some five years ago as a 50 percent joint venture between MGM Mirage, owner of Bellagio and other resort properties, and a subsidiary of Dubai World, the investment company once thought to have pockets as deep as its oil wells.

The old Boardwalk Hotel and Casino, in between the Monte Carlo and Bellagio, was torn down and construction began on CityCenter. Then came the world financial crisis and the two partners had a spat, with Dubai World suing MGM Mirage last spring.

"Just like every corporation in America, we had the economic downtown create some trouble for us," said spokesman Gordon Absher. "There was a point where CityCenter was very close to bankruptcy."

Thanks to a restructuring of loans, CityCenter pushed on to completion and today is on "a solid financial footing and has what the financial world refers to as a good amount of runway ahead of us," Absher said.

Some of the 7,000 rooms in the hotels are being offered for sale as condos, and prices have been slashed 30 percent, bringing an entry level unit to about \$400,000.

That's why there was as much relief as elation at December's grand opening,

where Bobby Baldwin, chief executive officer of CityCenter, looked out over an open-air news conference called in front of Aria, spread his arms and said: "It's hard to believe you can get all this for just \$8.5 billion."

21ST CENTURY VEGAS

Billed as an "urban metropolis" and a "city within a city," CityCenter consists of:

— Aria, a 61-story, 4,004-room resort with 11 restaurants featuring a roster of celebrity chefs. The hotel contains the project's one casino, the only place where smoking is allowed in CityCenter. Its spa has 62 treatment rooms and 800,000 square feet of space. Nightly rates range from \$149 to \$799 for rooms, \$500 to \$7,000 for suites.

— Las Vegas' first Mandarin Oriental, a 47-story luxury hotel with a 23rd-floor "sky lobby" and lounge overlooking The Strip. The hotel has 392 guest rooms and 227 residences. The two-story spa is an elegant sanctuary in this neon city.

— Vdara Hotel & Spa, a 57-story, all-suite boutique hotel with 1,495 rooms, each with a kitchen and most with a washer and dryer. The hotel, which will sell condos, connects to Bellagio by a walkway. Nightly rates range from \$149 to \$2,000.

— Veer Towers, twin 37-story buildings designed with a five-degree tilt that makes them eye-catching even amid the city's glittery skyline. The towers are the only strictly residential buildings in the complex.

— The Harmon, a 400-room luxury boutique hotel that will open later in 2010. Construction problems delayed the opening.

— Crystals, a 500,000-square-foot enclosed retail and entertainment district that will have Cartier, Dior, Prada, Tiffany, Versace and Vuitton among its high-end shops.

Eight renowned architectural firms took part in the project, including Pelli Clarke Pelli, which built the curvilinear steel and glass towers of Aria.

Walkways and an elevated electric tram connect the buildings.

"This is really 21st century Las Vegas," said Cesar Pelli, head of the architectural firm. "These are high standards that are going to be hard to match, but I hope others try."

PILLAR OF ICE

Paired with the architecture are large-scale works of what CityCenter says is the largest corporate-owned art collection on permanent public display in the world. You can't miss it. Check in at the Vdara and above the registration desk is Damascus Gate Variation I, a big and bold abstract painting by Frank Stella. In front of the hotel is an even larger work — some 200 aluminum canoes lashed together in a heap for Big Edge, an outdoor sculpture by Nancy Rubins.

There's a classic Henry Moore sculpture of reclining figures in the middle of a pocket garden, Mia Lin's 84-foot rendition of the Colorado River as a gleaming strand of reclaimed silver hanging in Aria's three-story lobby and a Pop Art sculpture of an 18-foot typewriter eraser standing on end by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.

A map shows the way to 15 of the works on the grounds. Michele Quinn, curator of the collection, said the art budget was \$40 million, with 40 percent of that spent on installation and other expenses.

"We had this great architecture, what can compete with it?" Quinn said on a walking tour of the collection. "Sculpture was really kind of the focal part from the beginning. If we would have bought all these great paintings, they would have been lost in here. We needed three-dimensional art. The entire 67 acres is a work of art in itself."

Water art also is prominent within the complex. WET, the California company that created the dancing fountains in front of Bellagio, was commissioned to install five water features. They range from the action of Lumia, a fountain of colored arcs of streaming water crashing together at the entrance to Aria, to the serenity of Glacia, pillars of carved ice that rise up to 15 feet tall in

the Crystals retail district. The eerie sounds of a "tonal poem" by the Grateful Dead's Mickey Hart plays softly in the background, adding to the ethereal experience.

Cirque du Soleil, in partnership with Elvis Presley Enterprises, has created art of another kind for the 1,840-seat theater in Aria. "Viva Elvis" is a permanent stage show that combines acrobatics and dance with vintage photographs, concert footage and songs by Elvis. Priscilla Presley, the late entertainer's wife, attended a sneak preview of the show and said: "Elvis would be very pleased to know that he's back in Vegas, again, in the way he should be presented."

ATTRACTING GOLDFISH

Now the question is whether there is enough bait to attract the "whales," the coveted high rollers who spread around their cash.

The Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, issued its annual economic outlook for southern Nevada during the grand opening hoopla, and its report was a downer.

The unemployment rate was 13 percent, home prices were still dropping and visitor volume declined for the second consecutive year. And those who came gambled less and left sooner, said Mary Riddell, an economics professor who is the center's interim director.

"The party's over," Riddell told the local newspaper. "Now, CityCenter is the wild card. Some say it'll create a huge surge in demand. Others say CityCenter will create an economic debacle."

The U.S. economy has not recovered sufficiently to allow big budgets for travel, Riddell said, which could mean good deals for bargain hunters.

"We're going to see deep discounting on rooms," she said. "That attracts goldfish. They gamble less than whales."

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