Urban Strip

The gargantuan new CityCenter breaks the mold of the typical Vegas development.

By Alex Ulam
CityCenter is an ambitious attempt to create a real downtown in the middle of Las Vegas.
AS VEGAS IS A CITY THAT EPITOMIZES everything unsustainable about contemporary American culture: gambling, real estate speculation, and a gross waste of environmental resources. The water shortage in southern Nevada is so bad that some conservationists have even called for a halt to development here. Most of the natural springs that once sustained the city have run dry, and Las Vegas now depends upon Lake Mead for 90 percent of its water. The man-made lake is fed by the Colorado River, which has been steadily running lower for the past decade. The city is also designed more for gas guzzling than for walking. Instead of an urban center or a square, the place evolved around a suburban-style strip, which still today caters mainly to a car-oriented culture.

Historically the developers of the city’s massive casinos were not concerned with establishing a local architectural identity, and they disregarded Nevada’s stunning desert scenery. The casinos along Las Vegas’s famous Strip are simulacra of places such as Venice, Luxor, and Manhattan. Even more disorienting and disconnected from their surroundings are the lush gardens around the casinos, replete with exotic flowers and sprawling lawns that also re-create places far away from this arid city.

Now MGM Mirage, one of the biggest Las Vegas casino operations, in conjunction with a subsidiary of the United Emirates-based resort developer Dubai World, has completed the $8.5 billion CityCenter, a place defined by curvilinear towers and mostly xeric landscapes. The massive development is a repudiation of the themed architecture that is Vegas’s calling card (and celebrated in Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s book *Learning from Las Vegas*).

MGM almost went bankrupt building this luxury complex of hotels, condominium towers, and a major new casino. And given the recession and its especially devastating impact on Las Vegas, December 2009 was an inauspicious time for such a development to open. But for MGM Mirage officials, the contemporary modernist design of the place is its trump card. The development is the brainchild of MGM Mirage CEO and chairman James Murren, whose idea was to build a pedestrian-friendly city center along the Strip with iconic architecture and landscape. “Las Vegas needed to create its own identity, its own place on the world
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stage for [it to] properly be what it deserves to be—one of the world's great cities," he said at CityCenter's opening in December. "A place where people come together, gather, enjoy, interact, and believe."

In addition to embracing the current vogue for "placemaking," MGM Mirage is also seeking to establish a new level of sustainability for megaprojects. And as the largest LEED development in the world and the first major project certified by the Forest Stewardship Council for using only wood that comes from sustainably managed forests, CityCenter certainly represents a major paradigm shift for Las Vegas.

The most visible sign of MGM's commitment to establishing a sustainable built environment is the landscape architecture at CityCenter, which had a whopping budget of $260 million. In contrast to the lush lawns and flower beds that surround many Las Vegas casinos, the landscape here is characterized by the use of succulents, cacti, and pebble mulch. The landscape also works to establish a
sense of place in ways that architecture generally fails to do in this era of globalization and "starchitects." Indeed, some critics have derided CityCenter as a caricature of a downtown. And while the gravity-defying tilted towers are not unique to Las Vegas, the plantings inform you that this city is located in the middle of a desert.

Sven Van Assche, vice president of design for MGM Mirage, says the landscapes at CityCenter contain lessons both for the design profession and for visitors in general. "We use plants that are low water usage and that don't need much daylight," he says. "All of that educates the customers and allows them to create an environment in their own home by learning from what we have done here."

Some of the most prominent firms in the profession worked on the 67-acre CityCenter complex. The Office of James Burnett served as executive landscape architect for the whole project. James Corner Field Operations designed the landscape architecture around the 61-story Aria hotel and casino; D.I.R.T. Studios, the landscape at the mall complex Crystals; Martha Schwartz Partners, the landscape at the VEER condominium towers; Hargreaves Associates, the landscape at the Mandarin hotel; and Meléndrez, the landscape at the Vdara hotel and spa.

The landscape architects who worked on CityCenter were governed by a less-is-more philosophy that was hashed out with the different firms at the beginning of the project, says Van Assche. "This isn't about laying out 30,000 trees at the Mirage Pool Deck," he says. "We knew that this was going to be an urban atmosphere, so we brought in landscape architects who could think about landscape in an architectural way—we needed designers who could think about hardscape and softscape."

The landscape architects on the project also had to stay true to the sustainability mandates of the landscape master plan, which in some respects proved to be overly ambitious. One of the most significant conservation features, an irrigation system that would have connected to an underground aquifer to provide independence from Las Vegas's dwindling municipal water supplies, had to be scrapped at the 11th hour to cut back on cost overruns. There are also some plants, such as palm trees, that consume a lot of water. Still, the landscape architecture at CityCenter does...
feature many effective water-saving strategies such as 100 percent drip irrigation and a wide selection of xeric plants. A plant list was established for the entire development after extensive study of species throughout Arizona and Nevada. Most were chosen on the basis of their ability to survive in Las Vegas’s harsh desert environment as well as for having aesthetic qualities appropriate to a resort landscape.

Overall, the horticulture requires 50 percent less water than other casino developments in Las Vegas. “It is still a resort landscape, and they still wanted an evergreen appeal to hold the structure of the plantings together,” says Biff Sturgess, ASLA, senior associate in the Office of James Burnett. “But nothing here is as high maintenance as a lawn.”

An 80-foot-high “tree house” and a work called Flower Carpet are among the parklike follies that were installed in the Crystals mall, the interior of which was designed by the Rockwell Group in conjunction with B.L.R.T. Studios.
CityCenter also features far less horticulture in general than other casinos. Instead of growing up out of sodded lawns or surrounded by lush understory plantings, trees are generally completely exposed and grow out of trenches or simple planters. Nature is tamed and arrayed in a spare, stripped-down fashion, which both jibes with the environmental agenda for the project and also ties in with a modernist landscape aesthetic. Many of the most significant landscape sections are designed around major works of contemporary or modern art.

Regardless of which exotically themed resorts one is visiting, most of these buildings are cavernous spaces with few windows, where it is easy to lose track of time. And certainly there are places within the Aria, such as the casino, where daylight never penetrates. However, in contrast to other resorts, CityCenter has many spaces with exquisitely detailed transitions between architecture and landscape. Light streams in through large plate-glass curtain walls at the entrances to buildings. Many of the landscape features can be experienced both indoors and outdoors.

One particularly striking area is behind the reception desk at the Aria, where interior sculptural elements are designed to work in tandem with exterior landscape features. Here, Silver River, a snake-shaped sculpture of reclaimed silver by Maya Lin that was inspired by the Colorado River, is suspended just in front of a huge glass curtain wall. Immediately on the other side of the glass is a riot of tree branches with gold and red leaves that looked stunning in the winter sunlight in December. Set around a shallow reflecting pool and a Henry Moore sculpture titled Reclining Connected Forms, this planted area, designed by D.I.R.T in conjunction with the Office of James Burnett, is one of the most serene places within the CityCenter complex.

However, here in the Mojave Desert, some of the plantings do not do full justice to the environmental theme of Lin's sculpture. The several dozen trees include species such as palo brea (Coriaria prunifera 'AZ'), willow acacia (Acacia salicina), and holly oak (Quercus ilex). Although these species have relatively low water irrigation requirements and may be appropriate for arid environments in other parts of the world, they certainly
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do not qualify as a xeriscape worthy of the Mojave Desert, which receives only four inches of rainfall a year on average. One species at this site, Natchez crape myrtle, cannot even be considered drought resistant in the context of Las Vegas's harsh environment. Still, this sparsely planted landscape represents a significant advance in sustainability when compared to the lushly planted environments that predominate at the city's other resorts.

Landscape architecture is also used to bring life to places typically devoid of nature. At a valet car pickup for the Aria, which is near the entrance of a lobby situated below grade, a landscape designed by James Corner Field Operations works in tandem with an ethereal artwork titled Vegas by Jenny Holzer. The art installation is composed of LED panels with white diodes, across which float various enigmatic phrases. The subterranean landscape, consisting of trapezoidal planted areas with rows of small cacti, is also particularly beautiful and mysterious—it creates something of the sense one gets from discovering a small clearing full of wildflowers in the middle of a dense wood. Most of the car pickup area is dark or illuminated by artificial light, but in this particular area holes are punched through the roadway above to allow rays of sunlight to reach down into the subterranean space to nourish plant life.

In some cases landscape architectural features are found within building interiors. The Crystals mall complex was even conceived around the idea of a park, according to David Rockwell, who designed the structure's interior in conjunction with D.I.R.T. Rockwell points to the curvilinear walkways throughout the building's interiors, which connect to curvilinear approaches to the building outdoors, as an example of a park-like feature. Other elements designed to be evocative of a "park" are the follies throughout the 500,000-square-foot mall. One folly is an enormous three-story sculpture inspired by Rome's Spanish Steps, but in the form of a tree house. In another part of the mall are metal trees with branches that are adorned with hanging potted plants.

An installation inside Crystals that especially speaks to MGM Mirage's agenda of "placemaking" is the Flower Carpet inspired by Rockwell's Grand Place Flower Carpet in Brussels, a temporary large flower installation that transforms a cobblestone area in the center of Brussels every two years. At Crystals the Flower Carpet is a space in the middle of one of the mall's interior walkways. It is designed to hold rotating arrangements of flowers. This past December, the Flower Carpet display consisted of a dazzling assortment of Christmas flowers including poinsettias, anthuriums, and cyclamens. According to one of Rockwell's design precepts, which is set forth in his book Spectacle, viewing an unusual sight such as
the Flower Carpet can provide such a transformative experience that it can create a sense of community among a group of people who otherwise might be strangers. However, after close study it appeared that although the arresting "spectacle" of the Flower Carpet did stop some flaneurs (strollers) for several moments, the commercial displays in the windows of the designer stores throughout the mall exerted a more mesmerizing effect.

For Van Assche, the parklike features at Crystals are emblematic of CityCenter's approach to urbanism. "We understandably have a building that has an indoor environment," says Van Assche, "but we wanted to imbue it with the energy of the outdoors—a quality that is prevalent throughout the project, but in a retail building it was even more important because we wanted to recreate the energy and the vibe one gets out of the experience of great plazas and centers in other cities."

While MGM officials aspire to create a true CityCenter on par with other great city centers throughout the world, the place cannot be mistaken for the type of places that urbanists are promoting today. Despite being more pedestrian friendly than other casino complexes in Las Vegas, CityCenter still privileges the automobile. Most of the large squares and wide boulevards are devoted to cars. The sidewalks along Casino Boulevard, which lead to Casino Square in front of the Aria, rise above grade level for much of the route and take one away from planted areas and connecting walkways. And while the curtain walls at the entrance areas to enormous buildings such as the Aria and Crystals do provide much more orientation to the outdoors in comparison to the other Las Vegas resorts, once one enters farther inside it is easy to get lost in mazes of shops and gambling tables.

Some important elements of established contemporary approaches to creating public spaces also are missing from this city within a city. Public benches and seats in the squares and along the indoor and outdoor walkways are few and far between. The lack of seating options here is reminiscent of traditional modernist-style plazas such as Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building or Dan Kiley's North Court at Lincoln Center, places that were designed to be moved through rather than to tarry. People did end up sitting on the sloping granite walls surrounding the plaza of the Seagram Building, much to the surprise of the structure's architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, but that's not likely to happen here, where there are no comparable ledges.

For Van Assche the relatively limited public seating options at CityCenter were a pragmatic choice that made sense given the large crowds that he is expecting will even-
As with other casinos along the Las Vegas Strip, the design of CityCenter's streetscape, above, along Las Vegas Boulevard (the Strip), by D.I.R.T. Studios in conjunction with the Rockwell Group, is more self-referential than it is about a shared understanding of urban forms. Although it is more pedestrian friendly than other casino developments, CityCenter features a bewildering assortment of ramps and levels, below.

Actually, it is also very green and sustainable. "In Las Vegas we have upwards of 40 million visitors a year, and we have a difficult enough time creating spaces and pathways that are large enough to accommodate such traffic," he says. "This is all about people meandering, it is all about people moving and discovering, and at the end of the day it is also a business model. We haven't created these buildings so that people can sit down and fall asleep for half a day—you want to do that, go to your hotel room. If you want to sit down for a few hours, sit down in one of the lounges or go to one of the cafes. There is too much of a challenge to providing parklike seating."

In comparison to the great parks and public squares throughout the world, CityCenter falls short of the aspirations of its developers. It doesn't have the diverse mix of uses or the public aspects that have come to be accepted as essential criteria for successful urban design. And given the particular challenges that the city faces from global warming and overdevelopment, it is questionable as to whether Las Vegas can really afford CityCenter no matter how sustainable it is.

However, despite its shortcomings as a true city center, the place does set a benchmark for developers of megaprojects in this age of scarcity of natural resources. As Van Asche notes, the landscapes at CityCenter are about striking a balance. "Our criteria were to be conservative in terms of water usage, but also to create a healthy environment," he says. "You don't have a healthy environment without daylight and plants."

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