



# Changing the Face of Las Vegas

Las Vegas is no stranger to thinking big. A new urban complex on the city's famous strip is being hailed as the largest privately funded construction project in the history of the United States, reports **Rebecca Wicks**.

**C**ITYCENTER IS NOT ONLY THE LARGEST, but also the most expensive privately funded construction project in the history of the United States, and its opening on December 16, 2009 proved that where there is a will there's a way.

The conceptual master plan for CityCenter, the resort set to change the face of the famous Las Vegas strip, was designed by internationally recognised Ehrenkrantz Eckstut & Kuhn Architects. They planned the project with roughly 2,400 condominium and condo-hotel units and approximately 4,800 hotel rooms to be distributed throughout several impressive high-rise towers, soaring into the Las Vegas skies and adding to the crowded, neon skyline. The centrepiece – the shimmering pod that is The Crystals, an ultra high-end retail and

entertainment district, acts as a gateway to what all involved are calling 'the city within a city'.

The sprawling development has now held not one, but several opening nights for its varying establishments, including a party for the plush non-gaming, non-smoking, all-suite Vdara Hotel and Spa. This launch caused a stir in the city when it was hosted by *Vanity Fair* magazine and the Sebastian Copeland Foundation. In attendance was Hollywood A-Lister, Orlando Bloom – a sure-fire way to grab the attention of other celebrities and high profile potential visitors.

One such celebrity who's been involved from the offset is actress Eva Longoria Parker, who's restaurant Beso promises to treat your taste buds to savoury, Latin-inspired dishes. When





(Left-Right): The Vdara Hotel & Spa is an internationally inspired all-suite hotel designed for those who love the excitement of Las Vegas; Silk Road, Vdara's destination restaurant, is inspired by the ancient trade route spanning from Venice to the Far East.



(Left-Right): Designed by renowned architects David Rockwell and Daniel Libeskind, Crystals is a dramatic retail district featuring elite luxury brands; A stylish deluxe king room with an electric view at the ARIA Resort & Casino.

you're full, take a seat on the sidelines of nightclub Eve, on the top floor of Crystals. Here you'll find the city's best-dressed shaking their stuff before windows offering unbeatable views of the flickering strip.

With a total cost of approximately \$11 billion, CityCenter has broken all manner of records for building projects in the US. Even the construction trailer was a controversial two-building, \$40-million complex located behind

New York New York hotel, set up to house some of the world's best architects, contractors and artists getting down to work behind the scenes. Once the CityCenter construction was complete, this extortionate building was demolished to make room for Phase Two – a residential condo tower, perfectly designed to work visually in line with the New York buildings on its south border close by.

The original cost estimate for the project was \$4 billion, but this figure rose due to growing construction costs and changes to the design. And this at a time when the entire world was weathering an economic storm – unemployment in Nevada was roughly 13 per cent, while visitor numbers to Las Vegas were at 35 million, as opposed to 40 million in 2007.

CityCenter managed to do its bit for employment figures when Vdara, Aria, Mandarin Oriental,

and The Crystals opened in December with approximately 12,000 employees under its shimmering new belt. Construction on the Veer Towers and the Harmon Hotel is expected to be completed this year.

**AT THE** peak of construction, the organised chaos surrounding the project saw the site rivalling many in China, with 8,000 construction workers and 39 cranes on site at any one time. Now almost complete, CityCenter is a huge urban complex covering 76 acres. It occupies the space between the Bellagio and Monte Carlo and Phase Two will eventually see the complex spread even further behind and between Monte Carlo and New York New York. To make room for CityCenter, The Boardwalk Hotel and Casino was demolished, along with the Bellagio employee parking lot and several standalone commercial structures.

The locals have jokingly labelled this new addition Gotham City, for The Crystal's



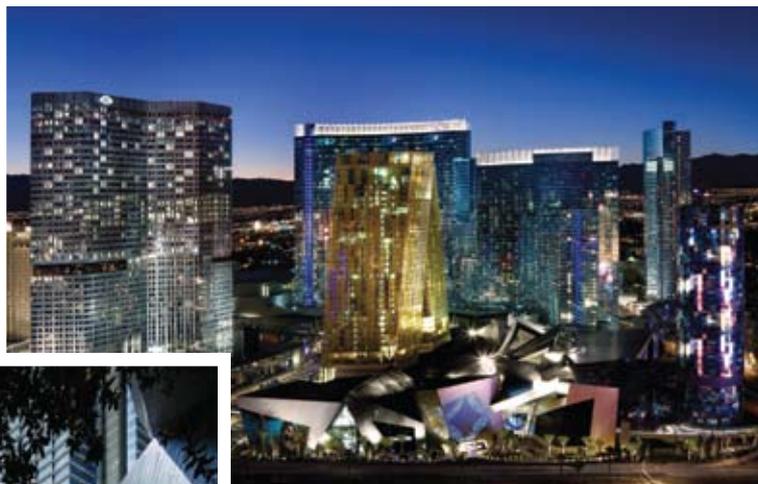
Eva Longoria Parker on the red carpet for the opening of her new Latin steakhouse, Beso, at Crystals.



Cirque du Soleil's new *Viva Elvis* show celebrates the legendary showman.



(Left-Right): Mandarin Oriental Las Vegas – Spa Orchid Room at the ARIA Resort & Casino; The Park with *Reclining Connected Forms* by Henry Moore; MGM MIRAGE Chairman and CEO Jim Murren leads the NYSE remote Closing Bell from CityCenter on December 16, 2009.



The bright lights of the CityCenter are a stunning addition to the Las Vegas skyline.



jagged rooftop. What lives inside is an upscale shopping centre with high-end retailers such as Roberto Cavalli, Bulgari, Cartier and Tiffany. It also houses a two-storey Louis Vuitton store, the brand's largest location in North America. The mall also promises to go natural with a series of 'pocket parks'. Foliage, flowers, natural lighting and two mesmerising water features created by WET Design – the brains behind the Bellagio Fountains and The Volcano at Mirage – all add to the outdoor feel.

Competitors meet questions about the project with furrowed brows. There is a combined concern that once finished, the new hotels, a 4,000-room affair with casino named Aria, two 400-room boutique hotels called The Residences at Mandarin Oriental, and the Harmon Hotel and Spa and the Vdara condo-hotel, will slash prices on the strip and push loyal visitors from other hotels into trying the new complex, where they'll continue to woo them with discounts in the height of new and tempting

luxury. Richard Ellis's Global Gaming Group predicted in November 2009 that between 70 and 90 per cent of CityCenter's revenues will be made at the expense of other, already established properties.

"I don't think they need to worry," says Antonio George, a frequent visitor to The Hotel at Mandalay Bay, further down the strip. "People have their favourite places and they have the people who know their names. That's not going to change. The people who stay at CityCenter will be all those looking for a cheap deal, at least in the beginning. It will find its own feet, like everything else in Vegas."

**THE NEXT** CityCenter hotel to be finished, the Harmon, is due to open this year. Once complete, the various buildings on site will all be connected by a people mover system. Its car parks will be carefully hidden and the project promises to be a mini-city complete with its own fire station, an on-site power plant and plenty of pedestrian

space. Impressively, as Las Vegas is one of the leading cities for incorporating green technology, CityCenter is also being built with a focus on staying as environmentally friendly as possible.

With its focus on art, The Harmon will be host to some of the world's most renowned sculptors, including Jenny Holzer, Frank Stella, Henry Moore, and Richard Long. The Crystals Mall will include \$40 million worth of modern sculptures and installations by world famous artists, and not one to forget the glitz and glamour exhibited by its neighbours, CityCenter will also play host to dazzling light shows projected against its building's facades and a brand new Cirque du Soleil show for the whole family, called *Viva Elvis* – a fusion of dance, acrobatics and live tunes paying tribute to the life and music of Elvis Presley.

If CityCenter's current reputation in the city is anything to go by, the finished project will be one of the greatest architectural success stories of the century. ■