

CASINO ENTERPRISE Management

■ DELIVERING THE WOW! THEMED VS. CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

By Barry Thalden

The Venice-themed Canal Shops at the Venetian Resort and Casino in Las Vegas has become a world-famous icon. Photo courtesy of Thalden - Boyd - Emery Architects.



..... A casino architect recently said, “Themed architecture is dead.” But as Mark Twain’s proverbial quote—“The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated”—suggests, theming is far from dead. In fact, it is alive and well. When it no longer draws people, it will be over. But as Walt Disney, the originator of themed architecture, said: “We need to provide more than a fun thing to do, we need to create a fun place to do it.” As long as people seek fun, excitement and something unique, theming will play a role in casino design.

Of course, modern architecture can also be great—and perhaps one could almost look at modern as another theme. But just being contemporary is not enough; it still has to deliver the WOW! When modern is the theme, the casino still needs a unique and identifiable image. It can’t be just big and modern, because in 10 years newer properties could be even bigger and even more modern. On the other hand, no property is likely to out-Venice the Venetian or do New York better than New York New York in Las Vegas.

The Real Promise

Because most casino guests do not win money (no big surprise), the casino must deliver on the real promise—a fun time. Which names create a greater anticipation of fun: Margaritaville and Treasure Island, or Grand?

The best properties immerse their customers in the experience of sights, sounds and even smells—the smell of crepes at Paris Las Vegas; listening to a gondolier sing “Volare” while riding a gondola through the Canal Shops in the Venetian; a stroll through the Central Park Slots in New York New York; dining atop the Eiffel Tower while watching the fountains at the Bellagio; walking beneath the ocean at Atlantis on Paradise Island. These are more than just something to do; they are opportunities to live unforgettable fantasies.

Paragon Casino in Marksville, La., is another great example. Its new expansion turned the ordinary into the extraordinary and re-themed the property as “Louisiana,” complete with jazz, Cajun food and New Orleans architecture. An indoor atrium even features a bayou (known to the rest of the world as a swamp) as part of the



The seasonally changing atrium garden at the Bellagio Resort & Casino in Las Vegas draws both tourists and locals.

Louisiana theme. While a swamp might not seem to have anything to do with a casino, when the thrashing alligators are fed three times a day it draws an enormous crowd. And drawing huge crowds is certainly beneficial to the casino, especially when people in those crowds are saying, "Wait 'til I tell my friends 'bout this. They just won't b'lieve it."

Whoever thought a swamp with live alligators could be a casino amenity? The point is that a great amenity is whatever brings people in, keeps people interested, and inspires customers to talk about their experiences at the casino—whatever that may be. Clients never say, "We need a swamp in this casino!" but they do say, "We need a WOW!" That's why creativity is essential for an architect.

Image is Everything

With original thinking, there is an opportunity to uniquely brand a casino with something no one else has—and that means coming up with ideas that are more interesting than just another buffet or steakhouse. Regardless of the size of the budget, creating a unique image is important to every casino property.

A great image brings more players to the casino and keeps them on property and having fun. As casino properties expand, the owners' typical question is: "What do we need to add next?" But what is added is not nearly as important as how it is added. The question owners should be asking is: "What can we do for our customers that will knock their socks off?"

Most visitors now head to casinos not just for the gaming, but for the unique experience. A recent American Gaming Association survey shows that the "environment" and "experience" are the top reasons customers come to a particular casino. Although customers have become more mobile and make more frequent casino visits, they have also become more demanding and sophisticated, and have higher expectations. As properties are built or expanded, they need to provide more to enhance the guest experience, because guests will travel farther if the experience is worth it. It takes more than just gaming to accomplish this—it takes exciting architecture.

"Must-see" attractions are prevalent throughout the gaming industry. Whether the casino is land-based in Las Vegas or on an Indian reservation, on a historic riverboat in Missouri, or dockside in Illinois or Indiana, the idea of creating themed excitement remains a primary design direction in the gaming industry.

It's Alive!

Theming occurs for a simple reason. With both commercial and Native American gaming companies in expansion mode, and with new gaming entities often being created, there is an obvious desire to stand out from the competition. Whether this will work long-term with each casino screaming for attention is unpredictable. However, as in Las Vegas, with more must-see attractions than can be seen in a day, it appears people are starting to plan longer stays rather than miss anything. Obviously, this helps build the market for everyone. It also gives tourists much more to talk about with their friends when they get home. That is why there are volcanoes erupting in Las Vegas, guitars and rock music blaring in Hollywood, Fla., and live alligators in an atrium swamp in Marksville.

Themed architecture can create an environment that takes people away from their typical, busy working lives—which are often mundane—and into a world of fantasy, where anything imaginable can happen. The casino industry has embraced themed designs to provide new customers with an unparalleled experience—something that thrills gamers and non-gamers alike, something that attracts people to the casinos and gives them a special experience they will be talking about for a long time.

Whether the architecture is contemporary or themed, it must be unique, it must be fun and it must deliver the WOW!



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