

Circa opening shows ‘promise’ for downtown, watchers say

By Mike Shoro and Bailey Schulz Las Vegas Review-Journal

October 25, 2020 - 11:44 pm

Las Vegas visitors will have access to a new adult playground this week: Circa.

The 777-room, 1.25 million-square-foot resort casino opens at 12:01 a.m. Wednesday. The property, developed by Derek Stevens, has already changed downtown’s skyline, offering a 35-story structure — downtown’s tallest — that includes the six-pool swimming venue and a three-story sportsbook. The property’s hotel tower is set to open [later this year](#).

It’s taken 40 years for downtown Las Vegas to open a new property from the ground up. While Circa is opening amid difficult circumstances, given the global pandemic, industry experts say the property and its unprecedented amenities will have a lasting impact on downtown and the greater Las Vegas Valley.

“It’s literally been decades since we’ve seen an investment of this scale in downtown Las Vegas,” said David Schwartz, a professor and gaming historian with UNLV. “So I think this really speaks a lot to where he (Derek Stevens) sees that part of town going.”

Changing downtown Las Vegas

The last time downtown Las Vegas opened a new property built from the ground up, Jimmy Carter was president.

Circa will be the first hotel-casino to debut in downtown Las Vegas since the Sundance Hotel — now the D Las Vegas, owned by Derek and his brother, Greg Stevens.

“This is a reflection of energy, excitement, of promise to the future, and I think it’s simply spectacular,” Mayor Carolyn Goodman said.

Asked why it took so long for another property to join the fold, Goodman said the “energy” of the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s focused on building resorts on the Strip rather than downtown. Downtown “was not only in disrepair and boarded up,” she said, but suffered from high crime and lacked appeal to visitors when her husband took office in 1999.

Goodman said the downtown area was recovering from the Great Recession and on a strong developmental path before the pandemic, which was like “putting a pin in a balloon.”

The mayor pointed to several recent developments. Last year, [multimillion-dollar renovations](#) turned the Stratosphere into The Strat. Earlier this year, plans were underway for the National Atomic Testing Museum to move to [downtown Las Vegas](#). And recently, developer J. Dapper, of Las Vegas-based Dapper Companies, said he plans to buy and reopen [downtown’s historic Huntridge Theater](#).

Circa’s opening is another example of downtown’s forward momentum.

“I’ve been here since 1964, and this is the most exciting it’s been,” Goodman said.

Schwartz said casinos in Las Vegas are at an “inflection point” where creativity and uniqueness appear to be replacing the homogeneity across casinos of the past. Circa represents a differentiated future, and, if successful, could inspire others to invest in downtown Las Vegas projects.

“I think it’s definitely a possibility that other people will see that Circa opened, and certainly if they are successful, will see they opened in the most challenging time possible in the last 50 years,” he said.

Circa could bring fresh opportunities and more visitors [21 and over](#) to downtown, said Greg Chase, founder and CEO of Experience Strategy Associates. He said that benefits downtown but also the greater city of Las Vegas.

Circa can entice people back through its amenities, like a tiered pool amphitheater dubbed “Stadium Swim” and a three-story sportsbook boasted as the largest in the world by cubic feet, as well as its other offerings and service levels.

“When you look at the history of new casino openings, not just downtown, but all across the Strip, there’s really been this historical premise of the newest, biggest, coolest thing to hit the area,” Chase said. “It becomes popular for a period of time and draws a lot of attention.”

Long-term impacts

Even after the shimmer of the latest and greatest wears off, Circa has potential to attract locals and visitors alike with its Stadium Swim and sportsbook, according to Schwartz.

Those amenities demonstrate a shift in what modern visitors to Las Vegas are looking for with the widespread availability in table games and slot machines, he said.

“Nobody is gonna say I have to drive past five other casinos because Circa is the only place I can play a Buffalo slot machine,” Schwartz said. “But I think they will say, ‘Well, Circa is the only place where I’m gonna get this kind of experience with the sportsbook or with Stadium Swim.’ ”

UNLV hospitality professor Mehmet Erdem noted that a novelty period might have lasted longer if it weren’t for the pandemic. With global transportation at nearly a standstill, the number of potential Circa customers has shrunk.

Risk factors

There are risks in opening a hotel-casino in the middle of a pandemic with depressed visitation and a crashed economy, Erdem said.

“They’re rolling the dice, but then again, these guys — they’re in the business of gaming, so I would say their risk tolerance is a little higher than your average Joe,” he said.

That risk, however, might be somewhat mitigated for Circa.

For one, Circa will be downtown, which isn't historically reliant upon the convention business in the way that the Strip is. The valley hasn't hosted a convention since the pandemic reached it in March. It'll be a while before they return to the valley, even with the [governor's recent easing on restrictions on large gatherings](#), Erdem warned. Circa may fare better during the pandemic if it doesn't have to host those conventions to stay economically viable, he said.

Downtown tends to draw a different crowd than the convention-dependent Strip, one that likes to hop from one casino to the next and enjoys a more old-school feeling, said Brendan Bussmann of Global Market Advisors, LLC.

"Downtown is where it all began and still holds a special place for a lot of people," Bussmann said.

Also, Erdem said Stevens isn't an out-of-country conglomerate trying to establish a property in a completely new market. He knows Las Vegas.

Erdem assumes Stevens and his team have done their market research and anticipate there is a segment of people who are looking for the type of property they're establishing.

"These are your local yokels," he said. "They're from here, they know the business, they're in the business. I would think they have a much better sense than an outsider investor in terms of what would work, what would not."

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