

New Casino, Restaurants Brighten Downtown Vegas

Written by Administrator

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The newest addition to Las Vegas' resurgent downtown announced itself this week with a marching band, a ribbon cutting and, of course, showgirls.

The Downtown Grand hotel-casino, which actually opened its doors in late October, aims to introduce an element of luxury among the retro casinos that populate old Las Vegas.

The hotel is one of several new businesses opening in the town's long-neglected core. Several high-concept restaurants have recently remade the look of the blocks east of the loveably tacky Fremont Street Experience, a walking mall under a metal canopy that displays a nightly light show. A private park built around shipping containers is expected to open next month, and after that, a theater.

Downtown Las Vegas, about 15 minutes north of the Strip, boasts some of the town's oldest casinos, including the Golden Nugget.

The Grand is taking over the former site of the Lady Luck casino on 3rd Street and Ogden Avenue, which has sat empty for years, adding to the blight that still characterizes much of downtown.

The Lady Luck opened in 1964 as a pinball and slot machine parlor called "Honest John's." It was renamed in 1968, and later became a popular downtown destination.

The casino closed in 2006 for what was supposed to be a year of renovations. Three years later, then-Mayor Oscar Goodman said the still-shuttered hotel had become a disaster.

On Tuesday afternoon, Goodman raised his trademark martini and toasted the buildings' new incarnation along with his wife, Carolyn Goodman, Las Vegas' current mayor.

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"The Lady Luck stood empty and sad for so long. To have a hotel come back revitalized, almost entirely rebuilt and to make such a mark here is simply incredible," Carolyn Goodman said.

Backers say the renovation cost more than \$100 million, about what Strip casinos spend to build a single mega-club

CIM Group, which advertises itself as "investing in urban communities," gutted and remade the Lady Luck to conform with downtown's new emphasis on walkability and community cohesion. The Grand incorporates elements of the two-block neighborhood the city has rebranded the Downtown3rd Entertainment District. Signs on the gambling floor direct visitors to restaurants around the corner, and the casino itself lies on both sides of Third Street, with an overhead walkway connecting the building's gambling floor and 634 hotel rooms.

The Grand also picks up on the 1920s gangster bar aesthetic that has become trendy in Las Vegas. Visitors can feed slot machines near leather armchairs, lavish chandeliers and lights that recall bare industrial bulbs.

CIM is planning a retail center across the street from the hotel near the Mob Museum, itself a recent addition to the neighborhood.

Much of the revitalization playing out around the new casino is supported by Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh, who moved the Internet retailer's headquarters from the suburbs to the old City Hall building one block over from the Grand in September.

Hsieh has committed to transforming the derelict heart of the city, pledging \$350 million to redevelopment, recruiting young people from the coasts to work for his Downtown Project, and buying up about 20 square blocks of land.

On a recent tour of the area, Hsieh kept up a running commentary on the construction sites that dot the blocks east of the Fremont Experience, describing the parks, schools and small businesses that were on the way, all green lighted by his 2-year-old organization.

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