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Inside the CityCenter Guest Room

Abigail A. Lorden

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Before there were IP networks or RFID access cards on The Strip, Las Vegas was already well on its way to becoming the center of innovation for the U.S. lodging industry. For the past several years, massive casino resorts have been cropping up all along Las Vegas Boulevard in a game of Monopoly one-upsmanship. After the next round of hotels open later this year with unprecedented guest room technology, Parker Brothers should be looking to replace paper money with a smart-card payment system to keep up.

All eyes are on CityCenter, which, when it opens in late 2009 after a hard-won uphill battle, will offer the most technologically advanced guest rooms anywhere in the U.S.; it's like Park Place meets Boardwalk, with a little bit of the U.S.S. Enterprise, all rolled into one.

The $8.4 billion dollar CityCenter project is a joint venture between MGM Mirage and Infinity World Development Corp., a subsidiary of Dubai World. More than just a new hotel, CityCenter is a colossal, sustainable urban community that covers 67 acres between the current Bellagio and Monte Carlo Resorts. The metropolis will include one gaming resort called ARIA Resort & Casino, plus three non-gaming hotels: Mandarin Oriental, Harmon Hotel and Vdara Hotel. The complex also includes residential buildings, condominium towers, and a sprawling retail and entertainment center called Crystals.

"Every part of CityCenter was surveyed and analyzed for technology enhancement," says Scot Campbell, senior vice president and chief information officer for MGM Mirage. "Some of the most noticeable areas that will be improved are the guest rooms, wireless connectivity, race and sports presentation technology, and all of the core technologies associated with guest service."

For MGM Mirage, completion of the CityCenter project had fallen under watchful eyes in recent weeks, after the company announced in March that it might be forced to default on billions of dollars in loans. A default on debt could trigger a series of other defaults, including the $1.8 billion loan that is funding the unfinished CityCenter. In late March, however, MGM Mirage announced the sale of the Treasure Island resort/casino to real estate mogul Phil Ruffin for $775 million. Ruffin plans to pay as much as $600 million upfront in cash, giving MGM Mirage some much-need capital. As of press time, the project is scheduled to open to the public in December 2009, right on time. And according to Campbell, all of the technology initiatives "remain intact, as per our original plans."

The in-room experience

While the entire complex will be a fantastic achievement -- from its massive structures to its largest-ever network -- it's the guest rooms that will pack some of the most 'wow' power. "The in-room technologies are the most exciting; we think that we are raising the bar as to what a customer will expect of a guest room in the future with these rooms. Not technology for tech's sake, but rich technologies that will enhance the customer experience," says Campbell.

In particular, the ARIA Resort and Casino and the Mandarin Oriental will deliver an unsurpassed level of personal automation for every guest room. CityCenter is working with Control4 to offer next-generation automation via one gigabit of bandwidth to every hotel room. The 1GB of fiber provides guests with an Internet connection that's up to eight times faster than the average U.S. hotel guest room today. Campbell expects these automations will have significant guest appeal. "Every room is outfitted with a next-generation room automation system including a rich user interface controlled on the flat panel display, as well as a touch screen at the bedside."

As a guest approaches his or her room, it will recognize if it's the guest's first time in the room and "greet" the guest as he or she enters. Light will fill the room, the curtains automatically will part to showcase the view, and the TV will turn on to display a list of automated controls for guests to personalize. Access to the room is granted via RFID-enabled door locks, which eliminate issues associated with traditional key demagnetization.

An integrated remote control gives guests one-touch access to dimmable lighting, room temperature, television/video systems, music, wake-up calls, draperies and requests for services. Each nightstand will feature a seven-inch panel with touch-screen technology that navigates the same room settings as the remote control. All settings will be remembered and incorporated every time a guest is in the room.

The integrated network enables guests to select "scenes" that match their preference, and all in-room systems will respond to the setting. For example, a "good night" button let's guests turn off the lights, TV and music, close the curtains, and enable the privacy notification.

Campbell isn't concerned about too much technology confusing CityCenter guests. It's intuitive, he says. "It's almost something you have to touch to understand. For a while, hotels thought to enhance the room control experience at the telephone, but that experience turned out to be hard to understand," he says. "The television is the logical place for this control; top it off with an easy-to-use room remote control, and before you know it, you are interacting with the technology and you don't even know it."

Each room is outfitted with a 42-inch LCD high-def television that offers [guestLINK] connectivity to

guests' personal devices: laptops, cameras, MP3 players, etc. The TVs are also the rooms' communication centers: when turned on, the television will automatically display message indicators sent to the guest.

Next-Gen network

All of these in-room systems are powered by CityCenter's massive network. The complex will have the largest distributed antenna system in the world, covering more than 14 million square feet. More than 6,500 antennas coupled with more than 2,900 wireless access points will enable WiFi in every room and anywhere on the campus.

All in-room devices also will be on the hotels' networks, enabling each property to easily communicate with the guest room to perform special requests or maintenance. And according to Campbell, there's a silent benefit to owning the infrastructure, both wired and wireless. "Owning a neutral host antenna system will be a way for the traditional IT department to begin to help generate revenue for our properties. Being able to monetize the space from a wireless standpoint is the vision of the future. There are next-generation technologies and solutions coming that will only be enabled by this kind of technology."

Sustainability

CityCenter is also leveraging technology to be significantly green, inside the guest room and out. Upon completion, it will be one of the largest projects ever to obtain LEED-certification for its Leadership in Environmental Energy and Design. In-room technology will offer guests a non-obtrusive way to conserve resources. Green settings on the room's remote system will let guests opt into temperature and light settings that reduce energy consumption.

Low-flow faucets and showers and low-flush toilets will contribute to water savings indoors. An on-site power plant provides for 10 percent of CityCenter's electricity needs. Throw-off heat generated during the production process will be used to heat domestic water.

Overall, CityCenter will include significant sustainability endeavors as they relate to material selection, water conservation, energy efficiency and more. So in addition to smart-card payment, Parker Brothers might want to consider adding LEED points to its next edition of Las Vegas Monopoly as well.