MEET THE MOGULS

THEATRICAL SPACES

With new projects including Payard and CityCenter, David Rockwell draws on his love for the stage to inspire how people eat, shop and interact

BY JACQUELYNN D. POWERS  PORTRAIT BY JONATHAN LEVINE

Architect David Rockwell's first project in Las Vegas was for visionary Steve Wynn; the colorful Samba Grill still stands as a Brazilian-themed eatery at the Mirage. Since then, his 200-person Rockwell Group has designed Nobu (Hard Rock Hotel & Casino), Emeril's (MGM Grand), Mesa Grill (Caesars Palace), Cherry (Red Rock Casino Resort Spa), Strip House (Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino) and the chandelier for Phantom—The Las Vegas Spectacular (The Venetian). David's vibrant and quirky stamp will next be seen on spaces such as Payard Patisserie & Bistro (Caesars Palace), Dos Caminos (The Palazzo), Simon at Palms Place, BLT Burger (Mirage) and the Crystals at CityCenter, its retail-entertainment component, a task he shares with famed architect Daniel Libeskind. (Cesar Pelli and Helmut Jahn are also involved with the impressive 76-acre CityCenter complex.) With his extensive knowledge of Las Vegas, Rockwell hopes to fashion the "connective tissue" of CityCenter into a stage where raw elements and bold features (think a modern tree house) inspire people to eat, shop and truly interact.

It's no surprise that David is drawing on his theater background for the Crystals. After all, Rockwell was immersed in the arts almost from infancy. His mother was a vaudeville performer and choreographer who often cast her son in roles in community theater. Although he gave up acting for an architecture degree at Syracuse University in New York State, his love of the stage has only increased and serves as his underlying muse. He has constructed sets for Broadway musicals such as Hairspray, Legally Blonde and Dirty Rotten Scoundrels. Overall, his work has a cinematic quality to it with elements of light, choreography and whimsy. While he is renowned for his commissions for staples such as Nobu, W Hotels, Rosa Mexicano, the Kodak Theatre and the upcoming Trump SoHo, Rockwell is also enamored with the notion of public spaces and city life. In Las Vegas, he has the opportunity to explore and mold all his creative urges.

VEGAS: Describe the Crystals project you are designing at CityCenter.

DAVID ROCKWELL: We've created this natural and electronic landscape. It's an abstracted 21st-century park with many wonderful live elements. There's a big welcoming carpet of flowers that changes seasonally and sweeps through the project.
There's a three-story wood structure that's a series of simple horizontal slabs that create a form that works like a tree house, but in a modern vocabulary. It's an abstract, graceful wood structure. We are also doing the grand stair, which is a big flowing stair that goes up 24 feet. It's our nod to the Spanish Steps in Rome. It will overlook the amazing spectacle of people having fun. Vegas is full of people, and we are creating theatrical spaces. One of the attractions of Vegas is the amazing confluence of people and the drama of public theater. So much of what I'm interested in with design is the power of live experiences and shared space. Vegas is the ultimate example of this in a world where people are so into on-line communities.

**What materials are you using?**

We are using natural materials that will feel good to the touch, so that it engages all of the senses. We are using every possible wood: epay, mahogany and maple. We are using agate, which is pieces of crystal cut in slices that we’re backlighting. We have these columns that go from the floor to the ceiling that have a trellis above with beautiful hanging plants. It’s like being in an updated idea of a gazebo. Vegas has gone from a place where people didn’t want you to know what time of day it was—or what season it was—to a place that really celebrates the time and the season.

CityCenter is a collaboration with other famous architects. Is there a sense of cohesion?

There's a sense of the same kind of dynamic transitions you get in New York City. MGM has put a sense of collaboration into place. They got all of the architects to work together to kick off the project. Everyone wasn’t working in their own world. They were collaborating on a shared vision, and then everyone developed their own piece.

You have just finished designing Payard Patisserie & Bistro at Caesars Palace. What was that like?

We wanted François Payard’s food to be center stage. There's an open, filigree, deep-chocolate-covered structure that you just move through. You are seduced into the place. The main dining room has a dramatic, circular expo kitchen in the center with this spectacular animated structure that uses real chocolate.

Like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*?

It's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* if he were French and had great taste.

How much did you collaborate with Payard?

François is a very involved client. We even developed custom plaster based on his creamed butter. It's a wonderful, creamy plaster. The light fixtures are inspired by
some of the tools he uses to cook with. As someone who loves theater and does one or two Broadway shows a year as a set designer, when we do a restaurant like Payard or a project like CityCenter, we try to develop the script from the client. You don’t get a written script like you do when you do Hairpin. The personality is the script; the more specific and idiosyncrasies, the richer the experience.

You are currently working on Kerry Simon’s new eatery at Palms Place. How is his personality shining through?

Kerry wanted a place that related to his use of fresh ingredients. He was interested in the design being natural, eco-friendly and sustainable. We merged mid-century American design with materials that are natural and tactile. We have beautiful wide-plank reclaimed-bamboo flooring. We built a custom greenhouse into the kitchen wall where Kerry will be displaying microgreens that he will be growing. The main restaurant has an 18-foot ceiling that cantilevers out over the pool. There are retractable doors so that the entire restaurant can open up to the outside when the weather permits. It looks over the pool toward the Strip. We are up-lighting the pool so that it transforms in the evening. It will have that feeling of sitting on reflective water.

BLT Burger at the Mirage sounds like a hip burger joint.

It focuses on the activity of making the burger. There’s a picnic area in the front where we used butcher-block wood on the floors, walls and ceiling. From the outside, you have this wood wrapper with changeable LED lighting in it. There’s a different glow for day and for night. We want the restaurant to be able to evolve over the day. When you come in, Laurent Tourondel will be making these wonderful custom milk shakes. On the other side, there’s a place where he’s developing home-brewed beer. We are flanking the entrance with two live activity areas of people making things. In the center of the space, up a series of steps, is a round burger grill that has a beautiful red-glazed brick wall that surrounds it. Behind that is a floor-to-ceiling, 80-foot-long photograph of the Nevada desert.

There is also Don Caminos at The Palazzo. Is this authentically Mexican?

You are talking to someone who lived in Mexico for six years. I have a real feel for Mexico. It’s a vast space; it seats 500 people. The entrance of the restaurant is lined with 250 backlit large-scale jugs. Roadside taco stands in Mexico have these large glass jugs filled with watermelon water or pineapple water. We have angled the jugs out from the wall and water goes from one glass jug to the other. That water wall takes you into the bar, which is a snake lounge. There are long, curved upholstered banquets in snakeskin leather with mohair pillows. Behind the bar there is a backlit glass custom art piece that we designed, which has a beautiful misty view of the Day of the Dead in Mexico where you can see glowing houses as far as the eye can see. It’s an infinite image behind the bar that is glowing. The main dining room is taken from markets in Mexico. The walls are collaged in hot-pink street art. The back wall is thousands of small candles behind glass. It’s an energetic space.

Strip House at Planet Hollywood is one of my favorite restaurants.

That was very fun to do. Strip House came very naturally, based on a playful take on the name. I loved the idea of doing a steakhouse that is as female-friendly as it is male-friendly. It’s really sexy and rich.

You have an extensive theater background.

What was it like designing a show in Vegas, namely Phantom?

I had seen the original Phantom of the Opera in New York. I thought it was one of the best-designed shows I had ever seen. It was designed by Maria Bjornson. When Hal Prince approached us about helping him create the show in Las Vegas, I was thrilled that he wanted to keep Maria’s design on-stage. We did the special effects for the theater, including the chandelier. It was a daunting task to create a chandelier that did what we wanted it to do. The chandelier starts out in four
fragments. The whole theater is draped in beige drop cloth. When you come in, the theater looks like it’s dusty and the chandelier is in broken fragments. During the overture, the dust cloths whisk off and the Paris Opera House comes to life. The ceiling lights up and glows. The chandelier, on 32 separate winches, circles the room and assembles in front of the audience. You don’t get to do that too often in life. It was a huge amount of fun.

Was this a bigger budget than Broadway?
It was not even close. The chandelier was more than almost any Broadway show’s set budget. It cost $3 million.

Are your Las Vegas projects the biggest-budget projects you undertake?
We are working on the Jets/Giants stadium, which is a huge budget. But in Vegas, there’s this great invitation to dream. Vegas’ most interesting days are ahead of it. Going to the theater for two and a half hours isn’t what people want to do. Just going to a restaurant isn’t enough. They are here for the net sum of all of these experiences. For a designer, there is an invitation to really create places that amaze people.

What do you think of the theme hotels—the idea that there is a pyramid on the Strip and the Eiffel Tower?
The challenge is that they don’t leave a lot to the imagination. I’m interested in design that leaves something for the viewer to bring to it. Once you’ve created a pyramid then forever you have this one very fixed, literal notion. What’s more interesting is collage and not being limited.

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How have you seen Vegas evolve?
There is a greater interest in quality in all categories. There’s a greater willingness to experiment. Traditional forms of entertainment that work elsewhere, like Broadway shows, don’t work in Vegas. Nightclubs have emerged as an art form, unlike anywhere else in the world. The high-end and the low-end of the market are merging. The middle market is interesting.

Is the future of Vegas in CityCenter types of projects?
There are some amazing people working in Vegas. Steve Wynn has redefined Vegas in many ways. Cirque du Soleil sets the bar for what is possible technically in theater. More and more interesting creative people—chefs, artists, architects, interior designers, storytellers and craftsmen—are getting turned on by the possibility in Vegas. The future is going to be things that can evolve like a city, things that aren’t all homogenous and hermetically sealed.

What about public spaces in Las Vegas? There are some pretty random stretches of the Strip.
Public space needs work. It’s one of the things that excited me about CityCenter. It’s not a public space, but we conceived the retail piece as a park. One of the things about Las Vegas that is unsatisfying is the railings along the streets. There is only one way to go. The vast number of people are largely directed in one direction. CityCenter has multiple places you can go and you can explore that. It’s not a single circulation loop. The future of Vegas is going to have more emphasis on the public realm.