

OBSERVATION, LISTENING AND EXPERIENCE: CREATING THE UNIQUE FROM THE UNIVERSAL

BY STACY ELLISTON

Since legalisation of gaming is becoming more common across the US, designs for these specialised markets must be developed. Care must be taken to know the market and design accordingly. Who is the customer? What brings them in? What types of entertainment do they desire: gaming, racing, sports, concerts, dining? Should it be a destination, a resort, or a home away from home for locals? Should the design follow the Las Vegas and Atlantic City markets or should these gaming facilities be something different, a new experience of their own?



Having designed for gaming properties throughout the country from destination markets like Las Vegas, to regional venues like Biloxi, Mississippi, and Louisiana, we found that in order for a property to succeed it is vital to know your customer. Give them more than they would ever expect. Create a design that appeals to who your guest aspires to be. We were founded in 2000 with the express intention of providing world class design and exceptional customer service no matter what the size or scope of the project. That meant developing close relationships with our clients, communicating throughout the project to make sure the design we create meets their vision for their property.

LOCALISATION BEYOND VEGAS AND ATLANTIC CITY

Unlike the Las Vegas Strip and Atlantic City markets, the emerging casino markets across the US tend to be targeted to locals. Guests drive from nearby towns, rather than coming for an extended stay. The guest is coming for an evening's entertainment: a nice dinner, a concert, an afternoon at the tables, slot machines, or the track. In locations with lodging accommodation guests may stay for a few days and are usually regional tourists. Rather than saving up for an extended vacation, these guests are spending their normal disposable income. The competition comes from other local entertainment options: local sports, restaurants, bars and movies. Although, with ever increasing petrol prices, these venues may become the new 'stay-cation' spots.

Valley View Downs, which is a new venue in Lawrence County, Pennsylvania – and which we are now providing interior design services for – will be a racino with a vast array of entertainment options including harness racing, gaming,

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upscale and casual dining, a high-energy feature bar, and a sports bar/nightclub with live music and dancing. In designing Valley View Downs, our goal is to create an environment in which guests will be back for regular visits. We want Valley View to be *the* premier place in the region for entertainment and dining: an escape from the daily grind and a home away from home. It will take several visits, for the guest to experience all that Valley View has to offer. There is something new each time they return.

Our market consist mainly of local blue collar workers with a long range reach of about a 300 mile radius adding college students from Youngstown, Ohio and varied clientele from Pittsburgh. About 50 percent of the population consists

of adults between the ages of 25 and 65 with a median age of 40, a moderate income and relatively low cost of living. Lawrence County is the 'Fireworks Capital of America' with two of the country's leading manufacturers of pyrotechnics.

We expanded on our experience with the Beau Rivage in Biloxi, where we created a four star resort property in a rural area, with modest incomes along the gulf coast of Mississippi. Some had concerns that the market wouldn't appreciate the level of design. Instead the Beau Rivage has become the premier property on the Gulf Coast with great returns for the owner and a huge impact on the local economy. Our design philosophy for Valley View is to make it a star property in its own right.



BEAU RIVAGE PHOENIX AND VALLEY VIEW VISION

The initial focus was to provide a property that represented the 'southern hospitality' upscale Southern. After Hurricane Katrina it was to put it back 'the way it was' with a few new updates. This was so the loyal customers would return to the property and feel that they never left.

So many case studies and demographics studies were done that we weren't concerned that there wasn't a market. The client, MGM Mirage, was confident. After all Beau Rivage Resort and Casino was one of the last casinos built on the Coast. The question wasn't 'would they come?' it was more like 'could we get them away from the casinos that they are used to frequenting?' Business tapered off a bit after the initial opening, but made a quick comeback and has been on top of the market ever since. A combination of design, service, marketing, and owner commitment to the region has created the experience we were looking for and successfully serves the guest.

Valley View Downs will be the premier location in the region for live harness racing. This location will bring together the traditional horse racing consumer with the gaming customer for a wealth of entertainment options. The design reflects how the guest wants to be seen. The guest will enter into a double volume gallery with a track view and colonnade leading to the track. A 60 foot long blown glass feature sculpture will lead to the gaming floor. Serving as a gathering

space, the entry is designed from natural materials to tie the elements of Valley View to its home in Lawrence County, Pennsylvania. Stacked stone walls, leather upholstery, and stone flooring, provide a comfortable familiarity to an exciting, new experience.

The gaming floor is all about energy and fun. Vibrant jewel tones are used throughout with a bold circular motif in the carpets and ceilings. Natural materials are used in unusual ways to tie the new back to the familiar. Columns are clad in wood with back lit cavities of metal and glowing acrylic. A focal wall features wood and metal with LED backlit acrylic boxes to create an ever changing art piece. Sweeping wavelike ceilings gradually slope to break up the expansive ceiling height. With the flashing lights and tones from the machines, who won't be ready to play?

The racetrack shaped feature bar will exhibit an art deco inspired mural related to Pennsylvania industry. The bar itself will be crafted from backlit 'living glass' with a black granite top and an open bar back for liquor displays. This high energy space features a reflective ceiling for light play and excitement. Guests can join the crowd, or opt for privacy within draped alcoves. This exciting new night spot will be in keeping with the concept using familiar elements in dramatic new ways.

Just off the gaming floor is a casual, quick dining food court with familiar food stations to appeal to all. Upstairs from the atrium is the race book with views to the track and



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grandstand seating. The race book area will offering traditional race book style carols or lounge seating for varied watching experiences.

With three levels of dining available, casual buffet, high energy sports bar, and luxury fine dining, there is something for everyone. The buffet is a casual atmosphere featuring trackside dining. The sports bar is designed to convert to a high-energy night club with live bands in the evening, so the guest can come and see the racing, watch their favourite team and dance the night away to live music. Fine dining is designed for the owners or those who aspire to be. It's a place for a special occasion: a romantic dinner, a celebration. Based on rustic wine cellar concept with brick walls, vaulted ceilings, and a candlelit feature wall.

DESIGN STYLE BY EXPERIENCE

We consider the basics of aesthetics: look and feel, function, durability, ease of cleaning, fire risk and much else besides, just as most designers would be expected to do. But in order to create a cohesive design we always go back to the client's goals, the customer, and the experience desired. In the case of Valley View Downs, we made a point to take the familiar elements – wood, stone, light and metal – to use them in both familiar and different ways to create a new experience, a 'wow' impression. Movement in the ceilings, bold colours and patterns, give way to excitement and energy. It's not really the use of tried and tested concepts to tell a story, but defining the experience desired with the client, and then selecting FF&E (furniture, fixtures and equipment) to support that experience.

Through the medium of interior architecture and interior design we create one-of-a-kind guest experiences in three, four and five star hotels, resorts and casinos. Design influences every space providing a lasting impression and a whole new experience for the guest. Great design inspires, creating a mood and evoking a positive feeling. Rather than have a very specific style that is all our own, we tend to focus on our clients' goals. That results in a diverse portfolio of projects. We involve our clients throughout the process to determine how a given space should feel.

Our experience in the gaming market has allowed us to touch every aspect of a casino, from the gaming floor, to guestrooms, ultra luxury suites, boutique retail, restaurants, spas, nightclubs and bars, theatres and even back-of-house office space. This work has consequently given us experience in a wide variety of project types. And our design philosophy, which enables us to create these experiences, is universal to any project type. The casino market is still

growing throughout the world even in these uncertain economic times. Cutting edge design will continue to be a critical element in the upper and luxury casino markets. Customers will still expect to be impressed.

Consultation is central to that end result. During initial meetings with the client we discuss their goals, the environment, the customer, the local conditions and competition. It is during those initial meetings that the design goals and desired experiences for the property are defined. Sometimes we help the client do the research, sometimes the client had been considering the project for a long time and comes to the meeting with much of the information we need.

As gaming has become a mainstream entertainment choice, the customer base has widened. Gaming options have spread throughout the world and gaming venues, like hotels and restaurants, are catering to various market niches from super luxury through to no frills. In many casino markets, gaming is just one of many entertainment options offered by the casinos. Revenues may be equally divided or even more heavily weighted to non-gaming operations. As casino developers compete to become the best and most luxurious properties, so their competitors elevate their visions. It is therefore exciting to have clients that want to push the envelope with innovative products and daring design. **CGI**

Images: Valley View Downs.

STACY ELLISTON



Since gaining her BA (Hons) from the Art Institute of Dallas, Texas, Stacy has been designing luxury hotel and casino interiors and developing original guest experiences. In keeping with our design approach, with each client she has worked over the last 15 years, their vision for each project is fully absorbed to embody the firms' mission to bring the client into the design process with each property becoming a unique reflection of the clients' goals. Stacy is personally involved in, and ultimately responsible for, the design direction for each interior project in the firm. She has also been an active member of the Network of Executive Women in Hospitality since 1995 and was rated one of the 'Best of the Best' contract designers by D Home Magazine in 2006, 2007 and 2008.