



Contact: Stacy Pearson
Rose & Allyn Public Relations
Office: 480.423.1414
Cell: 602.577.6888
Email: spearson@roseandallynpr.com

For Immediate Release
May 3, 2006

Big-city designs (finally) are destined for Phoenix

Erica Sagon
The Arizona Republic
May 3, 2006

Phoenix is flipping on its big-city lights.

Developers of some key retail and residential projects in the Valley are swapping Southwestern design staples like stucco and desert color schemes for digital billboards, news tickers, laser lights and Bellagio-like fountains.

Flashier décor from major metropolitan cities such as Las Vegas and New York City is arriving in Phoenix as the Valley matures and developers look for new ways for their projects to stand out.

Take Tempe Marketplace, for example.

To add oomph to the 1.3 million-square-foot shopping, dining and entertainment center at Loops 101 and 202, developers will top it with a laser canopy, making the project visible from more than a mile away. The center will open next summer.

Vestar Development Co., the Phoenix company behind Tempe Marketplace and Desert Ridge Marketplace in north Phoenix, said the crisscross of lights over shoppers' heads will cost more than \$1 million.

"It's going to make a bold statement," said David Larcher, executive vice president for Vestar.

Across the Valley, Westgate City Center in Glendale will boast a \$5 million fountain with dancing water and lights, which the developers liken to the Bellagio fountain in Las Vegas.

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Westgate's developer, Ellman Cos., will brighten the mega shopping, dining and entertainment complex with 30 giant digital billboards that flash advertisements and neon lights in the pedestrian plaza. The hub will open in phases beginning in October.

"There's a certain Times Square flavor to this," said Tim Wright, Ellman's senior vice president of real estate. "You aren't going to fall asleep when you're in the middle of Westgate.

"But we weren't saying, 'Let's try to drop New York into Glendale.' Let's remember, this is Arizona. We want people to recognize that this is a Southwestern project."

Snagging bits of design from other major cities and blending them with Arizona's Southwest flavor is expected as Phoenix grows up, said Jason Boyer, assistant vice president of the Phoenix office of GouldEvans Associates, an architecture and design firm based in Kansas City, Mo.

"Phoenix has always been the stepchild to other, larger metropolitan areas," Boyer said. "It's part of our catching up."

Ken Losch, a principal of Avenue Communities in Phoenix, agrees.

"I think everyone's been a bit asleep," Losch said. "Arizona just woke up to the fact that we're a primary city."

Avenue Communities is developing Centerpoint Condominiums, a mixed-use development of 1,000 residences and retail stores in downtown Tempe. Nestled at the base of four condo buildings will be an urban plaza with a 22-foot-by-44-foot video screen and news ticker. Losch envisions playing movies, or maybe even a presidential debate, when the plaza opens in a year and a half.

Erik Bidenkap, 23, of Chandler, recently reserved a two-bedroom condo at Centerpoint. Although he was attracted to the development's urban design, he said he doubts he would watch a movie in the plaza.

"I think it's more for aesthetics and feel," he said, "rather than functionality."