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Arizona project influences Coliseum remake vision

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GLENDALE, Ariz.

The beacon for Charles Wang's Lighthouse project came from the desert.

The ambitious vision of Wang and his partner Scott Rechler to remake the Nassau Coliseum site into a mixed-use center got its start here, where stores, offices, hotels and homes are sprouting in the shadow of two sports facilities.

Glendale, a fast-growing suburb 10 miles northwest of downtown Phoenix, is home to Westgate City Center. "It's 225 acres and 6 million square feet of planned stuff," said Jim Baeck, vice president of Baltimore-based Development Design Group. DDG, the project architect for Westgate, has been hired by Wang's Lighthouse Development Group to design the new Coliseum site.

Westgate's anchor is Jobing.com Arena, home of the NHL's Phoenix Coyotes. Across the street is University of Phoenix Stadium, home of the NFL's Arizona Cardinals. Between the sports facilities are retail shops, a movie theater, several restaurants and hotels. A condominium and apartment complex were completed late last year, and the first offices opened earlier this year. Last month, the Renaissance Glendale Hotel & Spa, a 12-story, 320-room luxury hotel, started serving its first guests.

And this is just Phase I. The entire Westgate project will be built out during the next 10 to 15 years, transforming what was once desert cotton fields into a self-contained minicity. In Glendale, there was a sense of urgency in getting this first phase finished. University of Phoenix Stadium is hosting this season's Super Bowl, bringing thousands of tourists to Arizona looking for places to stay, eat and spend.

Charles Wang visited Glendale in 2004 looking for ideas for his Coliseum makeover. When he came out here three years ago, except for the cactuses, Wang may have felt he was still in Uniondale. At the Westgate site, there was not much other than the hockey arena, which opened in 2003. What he did see was a scale model built by DDG showing what Westgate would look like when finished.

"What he liked about the Westgate model was how we created a town center with retail, offices and residential and how we interacted with the arena," said Baeck, the principal architect in charge of both Westgate and Lighthouse. "The projects are very similar in terms of what they're trying to create: a sense of community."

Jeffrey Hecht, director of public affairs for Ellman Cos., Westgate's developer, also recalls how much Wang was impressed by the model. Perhaps more important for Wang, the architects and developers

were able to turn the model into reality. "If you look at that scale model and look at what Westgate looks like today from an aerial photograph, they're identical," Hecht said. "Having come out and seen it and having chosen the same design architect, I'm sure he saw something he liked here."

One of the main differences between Westgate and the Lighthouse will be the amount of land used for the project. Westgate's 6.5 million square feet is spread over 225 acres; Lighthouse's 5.5 million will be on about 150 acres.

"Lighthouse will be a little more dense," Baeck said, but he believes that will help the project. "There's value in that density. It helps create a critical mass of residential, office, retail, restaurant and the Coliseum."

There's still a lot to go in Westgate. Phase I represents only 8 percent of the project. In the years ahead, more homes and offices are planned, including several office towers.

Although Lighthouse will have a nautical motif, Westgate is strictly Southwest. Palm trees sway in the desert breeze overlooking stucco buildings built in Arizona deco style. But can a Westgate-style development succeed 2,500 miles to the east? Hecht says yes. He is familiar with the Coliseum, having made numerous trips to the building when he was the communications director for the Coyotes.

"I think it will work well on Long Island," Hecht said.

Lighthouse's ultimate success will depend on whether Long Islanders see the site as more than just a place to go when there's a hockey game or rock concert. Westgate has proven successful as a gathering place for Arizonians just wanting to shop or dine out.

"It can create an urban hub that can compete with Manhattan," Hecht said of Lighthouse. "My parents grew up in New York City. When they walk around Westgate, they say it's like it was 50 years ago."

OF INTEREST

Baltimore-based Development Design Group, the project architect for Westgate, has been hired by Wang's Lighthouse Development Group to design the new Coliseum site.

WESTGATE VS. LIGHTHOUSE

A comparison of proposed features

WESTGATE CATEGORY LIGHTHOUSE

225 Acres 150

320 rooms

(more planned) Hotels 300 rooms

17,653 Seats for hockey 17,500

2,000 Residences 2,300

1.5 million sq. ft. Office space 1 million sq. ft.

2 million sq. ft. Retail space 500,000 sq. ft.

SOURCES: ELLMAN COS., ARIZONA REPUBLIC, LIGHTHOUSE

DEVELOPMENT GROUP

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