



UPPING THE ANTE

SOSH Architects uses post-Hurricane Katrina requirements as a springboard for challenging the conventions of gaming design at Mississippi's Scarlet Pearl Casino Resort.

BY CHRISTINA GREEN

FEDERAL EMERGENCY Management Agency (FEMA) guidelines don't usually serve as the focus of a vision board. But the beefed up safety regulations governing construction along the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina became the inspirational stepping off point for the design of the Scarlet Pearl Casino Resort. SOSH Architects principal Nory Hazaveh spun the new mandates, which aim to safeguard patrons and minimize weather-related damages during natural disasters, into an opportunity to capitalize on the site's waterfront views.

Previous building regulations had banned the construction of land-based

casinos in the area. But a new Mississippi state law that passed in the wake of Katrina gave on-land gaming projects within 800 ft. of the waterfront the green light, making way for the 500,000-sq.-ft., \$290 million development's construction. The resort would be D'Iberville's first gaming destination, providing FEMA's requirements were met.

Flood-prevention guidelines became a catalyst for the design team's architectural approach: The building had to be raised 18 ft. above ground level. "Much like Noah's Ark, all aspects of the resort, including utilities, games, restaurants and guest rooms, were elevated above ground and will remain



1 Curtain wall glazing with a low U-value and blackout drapery minimize heat gain within the hotel tower's light-filled accommodations.

NORY HAZAVEH

operational during flood emergencies,” says Hazaveh. Concrete columns on piles were used to boost the structure. Unobstructed coastal views worth celebrating was an auspicious byproduct.

“Our team works out of New York, where the environment is vertical,” explains Hazaveh, who co-founded SOSH Architects more than 35 years ago. “Upon our first arrival at the planned casino’s site, we were immediately impressed by the horizontal views it offers.”

Yes, ensuring all 300 suites within the 18-story hotel overlooked the Bay of Biloxi was part of the drill. (That involved strategically designing the building at

an obtuse angle toward the coast.) So were 9-ft.-high guest room ceilings and expansive windows. But for Hazaveh, leveraging the heightened presence went way beyond what was visible from within the property.

If built at a traditional height, the porte-cochère wouldn’t be seen by potential guests traveling nearby Interstate 110. Instead, the design team opted for an 80-ft.-tall structure that’s visible from that elevated highway. A jewel-like element made from tinted translucent panels tops the structural steel frame. The adjustable, color-shifting light arrays add long-distance drama, while a lower glass canopy protects guests from weather conditions without sacrificing



NORY HAZAVEH
SOSH ARCHITECTS

visual impact. Four sets of corner columns tie the modern structure to its local roots.

Paying tribute to the property's Southern heritage without resorting to overblown theming was a balancing act. Upon entering the resort through a glass vestibule, guests are greeted by a grand staircase and chandeliers suspended overhead that imbue a touch of Southern grandeur. In the entry and hotel lobbies, massive tiles with minimal joints evoke a monolithic, marble-like look, symbolizing the extravagance of the area's mansions.

Other stately design elements include the entry's 30-ft. columns, which are enclosed in a Japanese-fabricated crystallized glass material. Hazaveh says customers are drawn to the full-height pillars' shiny cladding.

"A driving factor of public disappointment is when a building's visual sense and sense of touch are in contradiction," he explains. So the design team brought every material, including the custom exterior glazing, down to ground level so that it could be touched and experienced by guests.

That approach is on prominent display in the resort's Under The Oak Café, which features a life-size, synthetic tree. The floor-to-ceiling fabricated piece references the cultural importance of oak trees on the Mississippi coast. Rising 22 ft. under a painted sky, the tree and



COURTESY OF SOSH ARCHITECTS (HAZAVEH)

2 Traditional Southern florals would have been too literal to fit the designer's modern vision. Custom wallcoverings showcasing X-ray images of flowers add an abstracted edge.



branches are made of fiberglass reinforced plastic, which has been formed around branch support tubes and a structural column within the trunk.

Color-changing lighting evokes seasonal changes and projects leaf-like images onto the cafe's mahogany- and blonde-colored porcelain floors. A white picket fence complemented by custom flowerbeds lining the venue's perimeter, as well as translucent buttercup-hued table tops and basket-shaped dining chairs, all highlight the Southern locale.

Throughout the property, the designers sought to render traditional motifs through a contemporary lens. Custom wallcoverings showcasing oversized X-ray images of flowers along a hotel corridor instill a sense of place without being too literal. Intrinsic interpretations of waves echoed throughout the resort—from the custom-fritted glass façade to the three levels of undulating soffits lining the casino ceiling—emphasize a coastal vibe.

Though a pillar in the property's design narrative, columns were intentionally left out of the casino's open floor plan. "We designed above previous thinking that had casinos cramming as many slots as possible into tight spaces with low ceilings," says Hazaveh.

Obstructive elements weren't the only casino stereotype the design team sought to avoid. Lengthy corridors were out, too. Amenities situated directly off the main gaming area eliminate the need for transitional spaces that add square footage without ROI.

A 20-ft. elongated metal panel ceiling system further amps up the casino floor's spacious feel, but still keeps human scale in mind. "The selection of finishes was critical to avoid an expansive airport feel," says Hazaveh. "The metal was customized to have the look of wood and the functionality of an open ceiling."

From the casino floor, guests can see the hotel lobby, event center, players'

lounge and various F&B venues. Similarly, the lobby offers glimpses of the casino entrance, hotel and VIP check-ins, gift shop and promotion desk.

A seamless connection between the gaming component and hotel accommodations was also key to a streamlined guest experience. Despite being linked to the casino podium, the hotel tower has its own independent structural, mechanical and electrical systems.

"This dovetailed with the general contractor's aggressive construction schedule, which allocated two different timelines: one for the tower and one for the podium," recalls Hazaveh. "In essence, we were constructing two buildings next to each other."

In the hotel tower, 234 deluxe rooms, 56 suites and 10 penthouse suites vary in decor and amenities depending on room type. But all accommodations share an emphasis on natural light. Millwork details, polished onyx or quartz countertops and leather headboards play right into Hazaveh's mission to incorporate textures that feel authentic.

That tactile materials mantra makes its way into the spa-like guest baths. Floors and walls are clad with Italian porcelain tiles. Three-dimensional wave tiles add texture to a feature wall illuminated by recessed LED cove lighting. Niche wall-to-wall vanities are accented by a driftwood tinted wood veneer and backlit mirrors, while the silver travertine countertops contrast with a white porcelain sink. Even drop-in bubble tubs are adorned with Italian mosaic relief porcelain tile.

The resort has a smoker-friendly policy, and that informed the gaming floor's overhead design. Ventilation was crucial. Eight feet of plenum space above the ceiling draws air through the metal panel system's gaps, minimizing the tobacco-induced haze that permeates many gaming facilities.

Allowing smoking on-site also meant the property wouldn't qualify for LEED



- 4** Rippled forms on this rectangular arch are a subtle nod to the coastal locale. A synthetic oak tree adds a bolder punch of Mississippi flair to the casino floor.
- 5** Luxe materials in the bathrooms indulge the guests' sense of touch. Sleek LED cove lighting ties in with the designer's green mission.

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

OWNER/OPERATOR/PURCHASING COMPANY
Land Holdings 1

ARCHITECT/DESIGN FIRM
SOSH Architects: Nory Hazaveh, principal and architect; Sueyi Rakowski, director of projects; Cheryl Hazaveh, senior interior designer; Nicholas Colello, senior associate; Betty Ng, senior interior designer

DESIGN CONSULTANTS
Linfield, Hunter & Junius Inc. (landscape architect); DeSimone Consulting Engineers (structural engineer); Machado Patano (civil engineer); M/E Engineering (MEP)

GENERAL CONTRACTOR
Roy Anderson Corp.

CARPET
Ulster

CASEGOODS/TABLES
American Atelier Inc.
LIGHTBLOCKS

COLUMN COVERS
Neopariés

EXTERIOR GLAZE (HOTEL TOWER)
NR Windows

FEATURE CEILING
Formglas

MILLWORK
American Atelier Inc.

MURALS/WALLCOVERINGS
MDC

TILE
Fiandre

certification, but that didn't deter the designers from incorporating sustainable features. A white roofing cap sheet that reflects the sun, as well as an insulated curtain wall and EIFS system, were installed to decrease cooling loads. Beyond flooding, other weather conditions were taken into account, including the incorporation of a custom curtain wall glazing that meets hurricane impact requirements.

"After countless hours of studying Southern culture and the devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina, our team created a design that married the two concepts and enhanced the D'Iberville landscape," says Hazaveh. When it comes to accommodating Mother Nature on a massive scale, the project has raised the stakes (literally) for regional gaming destinations. ●