

Casino Resort Evolution

The four stages, 1941-2005

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Influences on the initial development of the casino resort in Las Vegas: illegal casinos in Midwest, South, and East; legal casinos in Europe, legal gambling halls in Nevada.

1st generation

Starts with El Rancho Vegas (1941), the first insular, self-contained casino resort built on the Los Angeles Highway, which would eventually become the Las Vegas Strip.

Design: Low-rise motel buildings centered on a main casino/theater/restaurant structure. About 200-800 rooms. Surrounded by spacious grounds, swimming pools, and surface parking lots.

In this period, casino design was secondary to personalities—celebrities, casino executives—who gave the casino a public persona.

2nd generation

Anticipated by Riviera (1955), starts properly with International (now Hilton), 1969.

Design: Integrated large (1500-room plus) hotel tower and vast, low-rise building containing casino, restaurants, lounges, theaters, convention facilities, and restaurants. Surrounded by grounds, swimming pools integrated into resort complex, surface lots. Visitors are assumed to valet or park, not walk, to casino.

With adaptations (500-1000 room hotel towers, parking garages), 2nd generation resorts dominated Atlantic City until 2003; starts with Resorts International (converted existing hotel, 1978), reaches zenith with Trump Taj Mahal (1990).

Another variant, with small hotel towers but expanded ancillary amenities such as bowling alleys and movie theaters, becomes popular in Las Vegas as neighborhood casinos geared towards locals; starts with Sam's Town (1979), trend continues with casinos by Coast Casinos and Station Casinos.

In riverboat jurisdictions, non-sailing casino barges have been linked with ground-based hotel/restaurant buildings to create another variant of the 2nd generation casino resort.

Generally, most Indian casinos are based on the 2nd generation model with significant adaptations, including a greater emphasis on the casino at the expense of dining and entertainment.

3rd generation

Starts with the Mirage, 1989.

Design: Superficially, an updated version of the 2nd generation, often repeating the characteristic Y-shape pioneered by the International. Integrated large hotel tower (3000+ rooms) is attached to a vast, low-rise building containing casino, restaurants, lounges, theaters, convention facilities, and restaurants. Parking garages and spa areas are integrated into the overall design. Unlike 2nd generation resorts, there is an emphasis on Strip frontage and pedestrian access to the casino. Sometimes these resorts use flashy Strip-front displays to attract walk-ins.

Overall, the 3rd generation is marked by a greater emphasis on non-gaming aspects of resort, particularly entertainment, retail, dining, and nightclubs.

To date, the Borgata in Atlantic City is the first genuine 3rd generation casino outside of Las Vegas.

4th generation

Developing now, with Wynn Las Vegas (2005), Residences at MGM Grand

Design: Similar to 3rd generation, though built with an assumption that non-gaming elements will be equal—or greater than—the casino. In the case of Wynn Las Vegas, returns to the original 1st generation concept of resorts as inward-looking. MGM Grand, with the construction of condo towers on-site, illustrates the coming trend towards incorporating timeshare, secondary, and primary residential components into the casino resort. Instead of the casino coming to the neighborhood, the neighborhood comes to the casino.