

Former local and international architect Paul Steelman weighs in on Atlantic City's future

Dzheku

International architect Paul Steelman recently added two impressive lines to his resume: Circa and Resorts World, two of the newest casinos in Las Vegas.

But “this kid from Atlantic City” didn’t always have offices in Vegas, Macau, Ho Chi Minh City and Amsterdam.

Steelman, a former Longport resident and Atlantic City High School alumnus, followed in his father’s footsteps by becoming an architect. Between working in Atlantic City’s Planning and Development Department and helping design the city’s first casino, Resorts International, he has had a hand in shaping the city as we know it today.

Steelman opened his own architecture firm in 1987 shortly after moving to Vegas.

In 2005, he returned to Atlantic City to work on renovations to Harrah’s Resort. At the time, Harrah’s was looking to compete with the recently constructed Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa.

“They wanted to build a Neiman Marcus, which I thought was a terrible idea,” said Steelman. “We went for a walk one snowy day on the rooftop pool of the Harrah’s casino, and I said, “You know what? We have to build an interior pool that has a glass dome and then it can be a nightclub.” A week later, Steelman brought back a design for The Pool at Harrah’s that was approved.

Although Vegas is his home now, he still frequents the Atlantic City area to visit his mother. Steelman weighed in on what the future of his former hometown could be.

“An indoor water park would be an absolute winner for Atlantic City,” Steelman said, referring to Showboat owner Bart Blatstein’s plans to build an indoor water park adjacent to his hotel. “That is what we call a tandem-based activity, so it’s an activity that supports a hotel visit, supports a casino visit, supports the restaurants. It’s a giant chain of support.”

Steelman reminisced about riding his bike to Gardner’s Basin as a kid.

“When I was a kid, Gardner’s Basin was a marvelous place. It could really be something else. Gardner’s Basin could be one of those adjacent uses. You can imagine an inexpensive hotel tower or an inexpensive apartment building complex that has views of all the weather coming down from Barnegat Bay.”

In the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority’s most recent master plan of the Atlantic City Tourism District, released in 2017, Gardner’s Basin was described as a “significant natural resource, it provides for a unique amenity separate from the large-scale entertainment and casino uses in the Tourism District.”

Casinos in neighboring states like Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland and Delaware are taking into account entertainment and adjacent use of spaces when planning expansions, Steelman said.

“Those casinos are now thinking seriously about creating the proper tandem events that could actually be a casino that is oriented towards younger people,” he said.

“We have done master plans for A.C. for many visionaries that have come to the city saying, ‘this is the most beautiful city in the world — why isn’t this the most beautiful city in the world?’ It’s a beachfront promenade like no other in the world — if you add up all the hotel rooms, white sand beaches and buildings that face south,” said Steelman, who has worked with casino industry heavyweights like Kirk Kerkorian, Steve Wynn and Sheldon Adelson.

“Atlantic City should have a competitive advantage over anything in Philadelphia or New York. It should have a competitive advantage as being a destination like Las Vegas is.”