

THE ORAL HISTORY OF PAUL STEELMAN

Mr. Steelman, founder of Steelman Partners, is a world-renowned visionary designer of global entertainment, hospitality and gaming architecture. He's worked on projects such as the Golden Nugget, the Mirage, Sands Macau, and Casino Monte-Carlo in Monaco.

Can you tell us about your experience growing up in Atlantic City?

Well, I was very fortunate growing up in an area south Atlantic City called Longport, New Jersey. My father was an architect since virtually the day I was born. I lived in an architectural house—both my grandfathers were builders or contractors, so that's kind of what we did. I was fortunate enough that my father took an interest in me working as an architect, although, I wasn't that prone to it at a certain time of my life, but I did work for him starting when I was five or six years old. I would run blueprints and specifications and things of this nature. My father started to work in Atlantic City, which is four miles from where we lived, and eventually he moved right down and built a wing on our house for him to have his small architectural practice. Several years after that, he formed a partnership with another architect in the region. They moved to Pleasantville¹ and they became kind of the largest architect, designing schools and things of this nature.

How did you get into architecture?

I was very interested in aeronautics when I was a kid. I wanted to be an aeronautics engineer. I was doing the space race, and things of this nature. I thought that was the coolest thing in the world. But as I came through high school, we landed on the moon in 1969, and I realized that there was an awful lot of people that wanted to do the same exact thing that I wanted to do. I thought to myself as I went through high school that maybe this wouldn't be the best thing, maybe I should really try to do this architecture that I loved—I loved my father's work.

I had the privilege of building a house with him in nine days in Vermont—

¹ Pleasantville, New Jersey.

we built a pre-fabricated house and then assembled it in nine days. It was one of the highlights of my young life when I was twelve or thirteen years old. It was a ski house that we used approximately until I went to college as a matter of fact. Growing up in Atlantic City was kind of a unique place. It was a summer town, so it was kind of sleepy in the winter. My father did a lot of schools and a lot of funeral homes and car dealerships and things of this nature. But, all of a sudden when I graduated from college—I went to Clemson University—I was very happy to go to Clemson, and I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in the field of Architecture and a four-year degree. I decided to come home to New Jersey to work, although I had several job offers in South Carolina.

When I got home to New Jersey, I worked for my father for about a year—he wanted me to work for him. After about a year, I got a job which I thought was a very exciting job—it was a city planning job as Atlantic City had just voted for casino gambling. Which, in 1976, Atlantic City made a positive vote for casino gambling. I graduate college in 1977. For me to work with all the greats in the business, I thought my father would get a little bit of the work that was going to be associated with it, but there were some famous architects that were working in Atlantic City at the time. I wanted to meet them all.

So, you know, I met John Carl Warnecke, I met Martin Stern, I met Homer Rissman from Las Vegas, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. . .you know, most of the famous architects were doing something in Atlantic City at that particular time. At one time, working in the planning department there, we had actually charted that there were going to be over fifty casinos built Atlantic City—there was such a frenzy. I stayed there a little less than a year and I happened to meet a young guy at that time by the name of Joel Bergman. Joel was a little different than all the architects—definitely not a corporate guy. He was more of a free-spirited sort of guy who's in blue jeans, he always had a scarf, dynamic-looking kind of guy. . .didn't talk like an architect. He had some incredible stories and he approached a rather large building, a million square foot building, a little differently than most. I kind of liked Joel. I thought he was a really good guy. It actually happened that one day I thought to myself I should type a little note that and say that I would like to work a job for him. So, he wanted to see me one day. We had a little meeting, and then I said, "Joel," I handed him this little envelope, "read this when you leave." So, he pulled it out, read it, and he said, "I was going to ask you today if you wanted a job with me." I said, "Sure. I'll start anytime you want." I was not really cut out to be a municipal employee—I can tell you that right now.

So, we went to work with Joel Bergman. Joel had his own little firm that was owned by Golden Nugget, more or less at that time, to build the Golden Nugget in Atlantic City. I must admit those two years that we worked on that was an exciting time in my life. I wound up getting married in those couple years in

1980. It was really a difficult time for us, very difficult to build that building. And I realized that we were working for a different sort of client than Steve Wynn. I mean, here was a visionary sort of guy, who knew what he wanted in almost every aspect of the project. He could have easily been an architect. He was a great architect, great planner, great visionary sort of guy. I'll tell you—every minute with Joel was a joy for me. I really enjoyed every single thing, even the screaming matches. I talk about them fondly today as we would scream at one another once in a while. So, as I went into this, I realized that this was a good profession, part of my profession. The buildings were built fast; they weren't built slowly. They were built to make money; they weren't built to win architectural awards. They were very good for society because they created an awful lot of jobs—they made a lot of people happy. True, there was some gambling that was not great for some people, but there was also alcohol that is, for some people, not great as well.

So, I thought that these buildings were pretty special and they were really distinctive. They were as close as an architect could be to Disney and to the kind of characteristics that carry you away to a different place in time, as Disney might be. And so, I decided kind of at that particular time with Joel that I would do this as a life's work sort of thing. We were offered a position kind of weirdly. We were supposed to move to Las Vegas to do what was called the Victoria's Sporting Club, which was Steve Wynn's attempt before the Mirage. At the last minute, Joel loved Atlantic City—I'm not sure why—he decided that he wanted to stay, and he wanted me to stay with him. So, we did work for about a year for Resorts International on what would then become the Trump Taj Mahal. Joel and myself, after about a year, got a call from Steve Wynn: "Let's move to Las Vegas." I couldn't be happier moving to Las Vegas to be honest with you. At first, we all went back to do the Golden Nugget Marina, which was going to be Steve Wynn's second casino in Atlantic City. But in 1985, he broke the news that he was going to sell Atlantic City and he wanted us all to move to Las Vegas—and we did, most of us did. Several of us here moved so there are many people that worked in that little group in Atlantic City that moved here with Steven Wynn or around Steve Wynn.

And then we started to work directly on the Mirage. We spent about four years of our lives on the Mirage. In the middle of that in 1987—I was sort of an entrepreneurial guy all my life. . . I had many little businesses when I was a kid, and put myself more or less through college. My parents gave me some help—God bless my father. But, you know, I was on my own. So, I knew that I wanted to have my own sort of business, and the opportunity came up through another guy that we met and who I really worshipped—was a guy named Henry Conversano, who just recently passed away maybe three months ago.² Henry

² This interview was conducted on January 8, 2019.

was Steve Wynn's interior designer, as well as being the interior designer for Harrah's Lake Tahoe, and for Bill Harrah. . . as well as Playboy and many of the other casino companies. Henry was an extremely talented designer that was schooled in New York City, from New York City. He eventually became Donald Trump's designer for his penthouse apartment in the Trump Tower. Henry wanted me to be with him on many jobs because he felt if he had an architect with him, he could easily combat some of the what he considered "non-progressive" thinking of architects—just as Walt Disney thought that architects were mathematical thinkers, not design thinkers. So anyway, with his help, I started my own practice on Desert Inn Road here—3300 Desert Inn—and I started working with Henry Conversano. I left the Golden Nugget and Atlandia Designs—it was Henry's call—and that was the start of my own business on June 15, 1987.

My first little project was the front of Bally's, which never got built. We had some other projects. I was introduced to Cactus Pete's in Jackpot, Nevada. Caesar's found me, and I did a little work in Palm Springs for them. I eventually found some work with Harrah's—I did Ak-Chin.³ I didn't realize at this particular time, but it seemed like gaming was going to explode throughout the United States. So, at this time Steve Wynn happened to call Henry back, and Henry said that he and I would like to come back and do work on the interiors of the Mirage. So we did work on the interiors—approximately 200,000 square feet in the casino, sportsbook, California Pizza restaurant, the gourmet rooms, the French room, the Chinese steakhouse—Kokomos, the hotel lobby and those types of things with Henry. When I was with Joel, I designed the porte-cochere.⁴ The waterfall, the flaming Volcano was all Steve Wynn's idea, no one else's but his. But I enjoyed working on that project. It was a significant milestone in my life when it opened in 1989. It not only was a project that changed casino design to a certain degree, but it also kind of changed Las Vegas. Las Vegas at that time had sixteen, eighteen million people coming to it every year, and now, forty-two, forty-three million strong every single year, and it all started with that project no matter what anybody says.

Consequently, since then obviously, we've opened a big practice where we've sub-divided our business here into different businesses: architecture, interior design, lighting design, theatrical design, planning. We have an 85 regional company; we have an investment company where we own some of the projects that we actually build; we have an airplane company; and we have a slot

³ Harrah's Ak-Chin Casino is a hotel and casino, located in Maricopa, Arizona, that is owned by the Ak-Chin Indian community, and operated by Caesar's Entertainment Corporation.

⁴ The porte-cochere chandelier at the Mirage resembled a huge stylized flower. Barbara Thornburg, *Style: Architecture: Details, Details*, L.A. TIMES (Dec. 12, 1993), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-12-12-tm-1259-story.html>.

machine design and product development company. We've diversified our overall offering here as time went on. We started as an architect—but now we have all these diversified offerings and partners.

How did you get to the become one of the world's premier designers of the world's top entertainment and gaming destinations?

Well, it takes a certain *type* of architect to design a gaming facility—one that has to know about planning. Of course, Joel Bergman was one of the greatest casino planners in the world. The planning relationships are very, very important. Not only to the overall financial success of the project from a customer standpoint, but also from an employee's standpoint, energy standpoint, and all sorts of things. There are a lot of rules to casino design, and many architects feel that they can step into it, design a casino, and do a better job than the guys who do it all the time. You know, in City Center, they had sixty-five architects, and of course it led to a solution that is not well received in Las Vegas—at least it wasn't well received when it first opened.

You know, we are great listeners to the mavericks of our industry—the mavericks being Steve Wynn, or KT Lim at Genting, or Francis Lui and his father of Galaxy, or Sheldon Adelson and Rob Goldstein, and Brad Stone and Bill Weidner at the Venetian, Jim Murren at the MGM. You have to be a great listener to these guys. These guys are wanting things that nobody else wants, they're not in your shopping mall. The guys that want things that are in shopping mall are usually the guys that aren't successful. So, you have to be a great listener to the guys that want to break the mold every single time, experiment with things, do a building that is financially successful. In architecture, we always have to realize that we're never going to win an architectural reward for something. You know, I will never become an FAIA⁵ because I'm not that type of architect. I'm a commercially driven architect. I'm driven by finances, profits, jobs, energy, likeability. It drives a lot of architects crazy that in the top ten buildings in America, the Bellagio is listed as one of them. I did not design the Bellagio, but it is of the same type of building that we do. Because it's a memorable event for people—for lay people. The best thing—architects kind of explain their buildings through architecture, through their own ego, their own story. Whereas, we become more accepted by most of the owners is because we really know what we're doing and we pride ourselves in having the top casino in that particular market. That's the goal for us every single time.

⁵ Fellow of the American Institute of Architects.

What's one of your most memorable projects, and why?

There was a lot along the way. I told you about the Mirage—that was a very memorable project. The first Indian casino we did—Ak-Chin. The biggest riverboat we did—Caesar's in Lawrenceburg, Indiana. When we renovated and modified the Showboat⁶ both here and in Atlantic City for Frank Modica—that was extremely memorable. When we did our first European casino—Locarno in Switzerland. Working overseas was a very memorable experience. When we were hired by Sol Kerzner to do the Palace of the Lost City Casino building and the expansion to his entertainment center, that was a very, very memorable experience for us. When Bill Weidner hired us to do the Sands in Macau—that was almost a trend-setting moment for us. We got our second footprint in Asia, and of course it became one of the most successful casinos in the world, eventually leading to Sheldon Adelson's dominance of the casino world from a capitalization standpoint, and then consequently, his dominance of Republican politics.

The Sands Macau was an incredible job for us. We virtually worked a sleepless weekend on Labor Day Weekend in 2001 or 2002, I believe. About ten of us stayed here over the weekend. We designed the casino. We went in on the Tuesday morning after Labor Day to show it to Sheldon, Jim Buyer—who was their architect, and Brad Stone. They all turned to one another and said, "Let's build it," and that's what we did. So that was a pretty unique experience. It was a trendsetting casino in many ways: It had a double height; it had a very high ceiling, where Steve Wynn promoted low ceilings; it had a window in it; it had an east-facing window—it was actually day-lit; it was a stadium of gambling; and it was rather successful. It cost 181 million dollars to build it, 240 million dollars overall. In its second or third year before the Venetian opened, it made almost 600 million dollars in one year, so that was a very successful project. That was pretty memorable and pretty, pretty unique.

Working for KT Lim at Resorts World is a very memorable experience of working with one of the most successful guys in our industry—a true visionary. Working with Francis Lui and Galaxy Projects in Macau the same way. And also working with Tan Sri Dr. Chen Lip Keong, who is the owner of NagaWorld in Cambodia and also in Russia. He is a very interesting guy as well who has changed the casino, how to design a casino in a big sort of way in a little corner of the world, so we've always liked working for him. But I've had many memorable projects along the way. We've designed casinos in France, we've

⁶ Mr. Steelman refers to the Showboat Atlantic City, which opened as a casino hotel in Atlantic City in 1987, and the Showboat Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, which later became known as Castaways Hotel and Casino, and demolished on January 11, 2006.

designed casinos in Sochi, Russia... Vladivostok... in Greece... in Switzerland... in England... in Cambodia... now Korea... Macau. We've done some non-gaming projects in Malaysia where there's theme parks and things of this nature. Each project has its own little story. I mean, I can sit here and tell you a thousand stories on all these little projects, some are big projects. But they're really great, memorable stories that are pretty fantastic—about the building, the construction, the politics, and everything that is associated with our profession in the casino design business.

Can you tell us about your experiences working with, and designing projects for Wynn, Adelson, Ruffin, and Prince Albert of Monaco?

Well, Prince Albert of Monaco was a great story. We were given this opportunity by a friend of ours who used to run the Aladdin here, named William Timmins. Bill Timmins was Director of London Clubs International. We actually, were very friendly with him, were a bit friendly with him, for maybe fifteen years. Bill was the guy in charge of the Aladdin some time and then eventually went over back to London and we did a project for him in Leicester Square—probably the most profitable casino in England. Bill gave us this opportunity to work with Prince Albert of Monaco. We had several meetings with the Prince to renovate Casino Monte-Carlo—the most famous casino in the world—built in 1863, home of the Vanderbilts, and you know, the steel guys gambling in tuxedos and so on. It was interesting working with him, and it was a very interesting project of which, we did the whole project it turned out. It was all done, and then... only partially built. There was some labor strife in Monaco and that affected the actual construction of this overall project. But it's a great building, it was a lot of fun to work on such a historic example, and as the Prince asked me, he said, "You know, I don't want it to be a museum. I need it to have life, even though it's historic."

We've also done another historic project where we took a building in the center of Madrid in Spain for a client named Grupo Comar. We turned that into a very high-end casino. Very, very interesting experiences. I think I told you a lot about Wynn and the experiences working with him. Sheldon—a very unique sort of guy, looks at things a lot different than most. I'm not sure if Sheldon really knows how to gamble to be honest with you. He always says the only hand he holds is his wife's. As tough of a man as he, I enjoyed working for him and I always thought that he had a unique perspective on the ancillary businesses associated with casinos—more so than many of the casino-driven clients that we have. He was driven by other things. He was driven by the convention business and the room business, and he was driven—bigger is better. He could do almost anything. He was a powerful guy like that. He would give my girls a little bit of a fit sometimes. They would come here crying, you know the interior designers, but I mean, he was pretty interesting.

Phil Ruffin, kind of an old sort of guy from Kansas City, has a down-deep gambling mentality sort of guy, loves the Gilly's mid-market sort of thing, and working with him was a pretty interesting project, and pretty unique to be honest with you.

As we sit here today, we hope that we'll have ten buildings under construction, and many more under design. We open that we will be influencing other regions of the world to in fact create the entertainment cities that Las Vegas has become. We're working on new entertainment cities in Korea, India, Cambodia, Vietnam, all sorts of places. We're very anxious to see how the digital revolution—virtual reality and augmented reality—actually come into our overall practice here and see how that affects our overall business as we carry forward and go forward in this life.

I'm very fortunate that I have a daughter who will be an architect. She graduated from Oklahoma and Clemson—she's downstairs right now. She is in the process of taking all her very difficult architectural exams. I have a son who is a film producer sort of a guy—he does lots of film works for rock and roll bands and DJs. He was an actor at one time in several movies.

I'm looking at your Dragon Hill Project in Vietnam. . .how do these designs come to you?

A lot of people ask that. You know, the design of the project is influenced by the people that are going to use it, and then the location where it's at. So, we always need to be respectful of that location because if not, a casino looks like they copied a downtown Las Vegas casino and put it in the middle of Moscow, I mean it looks stupid. So, we have a lot of rules about the architecture. The exterior architecture gets checked once, but then the interior gets checked over and over again. We have many rules about driving and traffic and structural grids and parking garages—there are many, many rules to in fact do this. As far as your overall aesthetic as you come into things, the casino design has morphed along with society. Society has changed, so has casino design. If you still look at the spaces that have been created that are successful, that have been successful, Steve Wynn would always look to the 18,000 oval at Caesar's Palace—probably the most successful casino square footage in Las Vegas. We wanted to change it, we wanted to advance it, but we didn't want to not have that. So, there's always a kind of a stepping stone. You're stepping from the next thing to the next thing to the next thing to the next thing. True, you need a visionary like KT Lim or Steve Wynn or Francis Lui to in fact take you on that journey as an architect. True, you can suggest things to them and they are open to suggestions. And of course, as a filter for suggestions here, we hear them all. Some we are not that fond of, and others we're very fond of, but we know for a fact that we have to continually advance our buildings to make more money, to be more successful,

Spring/Summer 2019] *STEELMAN ORAL HISTORY*

145

to be more loved, to be the “Instagram-able,” and these types of things now.

We get our influences from all sorts of things—I mean from travel, from a piece of sculpture, from whatever. But you have to realize that we’re practical. A hotel has to look like a hotel. A casino has to look like a casino. Many architects will take this as an advantage to do something not affordable. We know that that will never work. So we’re kind of a visionary sort of thing, coming up with some things, whatever that might be, and we will then be practical to do it within— you got to realize that Stan Fulton⁷. Stan once told me that he earned all of his money twenty-five cents at a time, and that’s true in all these places. So, you have to realize that. There’s no Wallstreet gusher here. This is hard work for operations, really hard work.

⁷ The building that houses the UNLV International Gaming Institute is named after Stan Fulton.