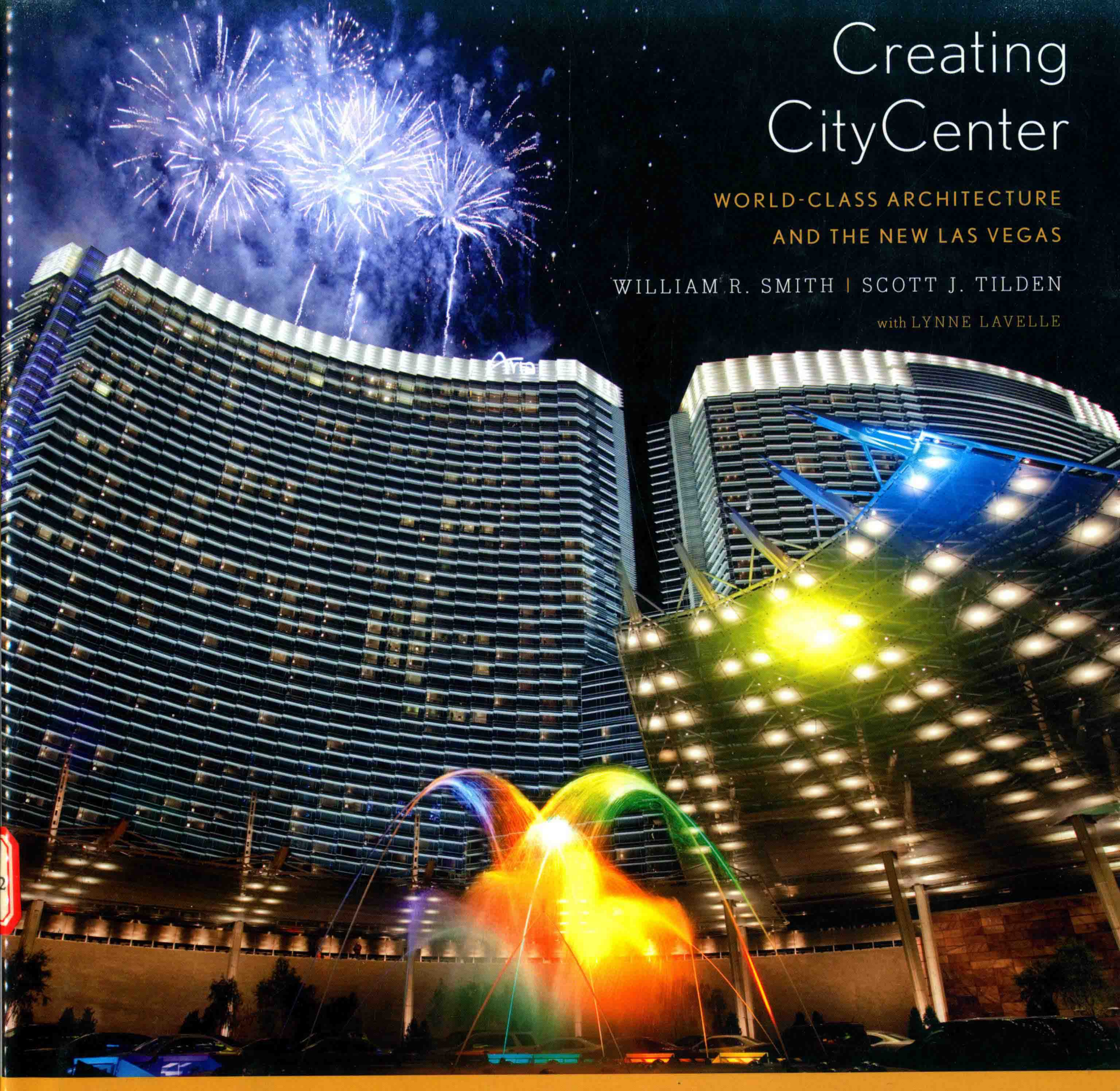


# Creating CityCenter

WORLD-CLASS ARCHITECTURE  
AND THE NEW LAS VEGAS

WILLIAM R. SMITH | SCOTT J. TILDEN

with LYNNE LAVELLE







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W. W. NORTON & COMPANY  
NEW YORK • LONDON



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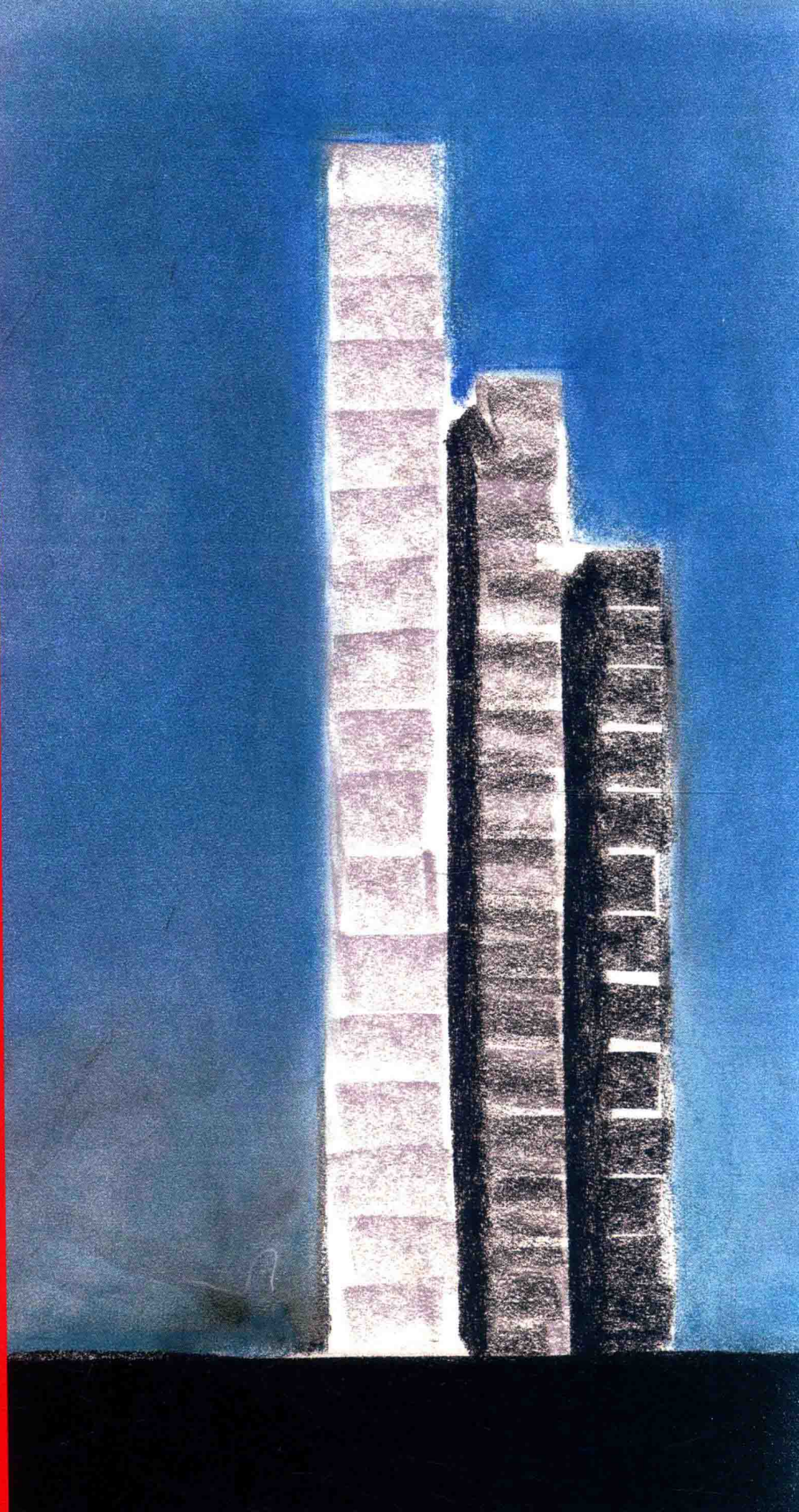
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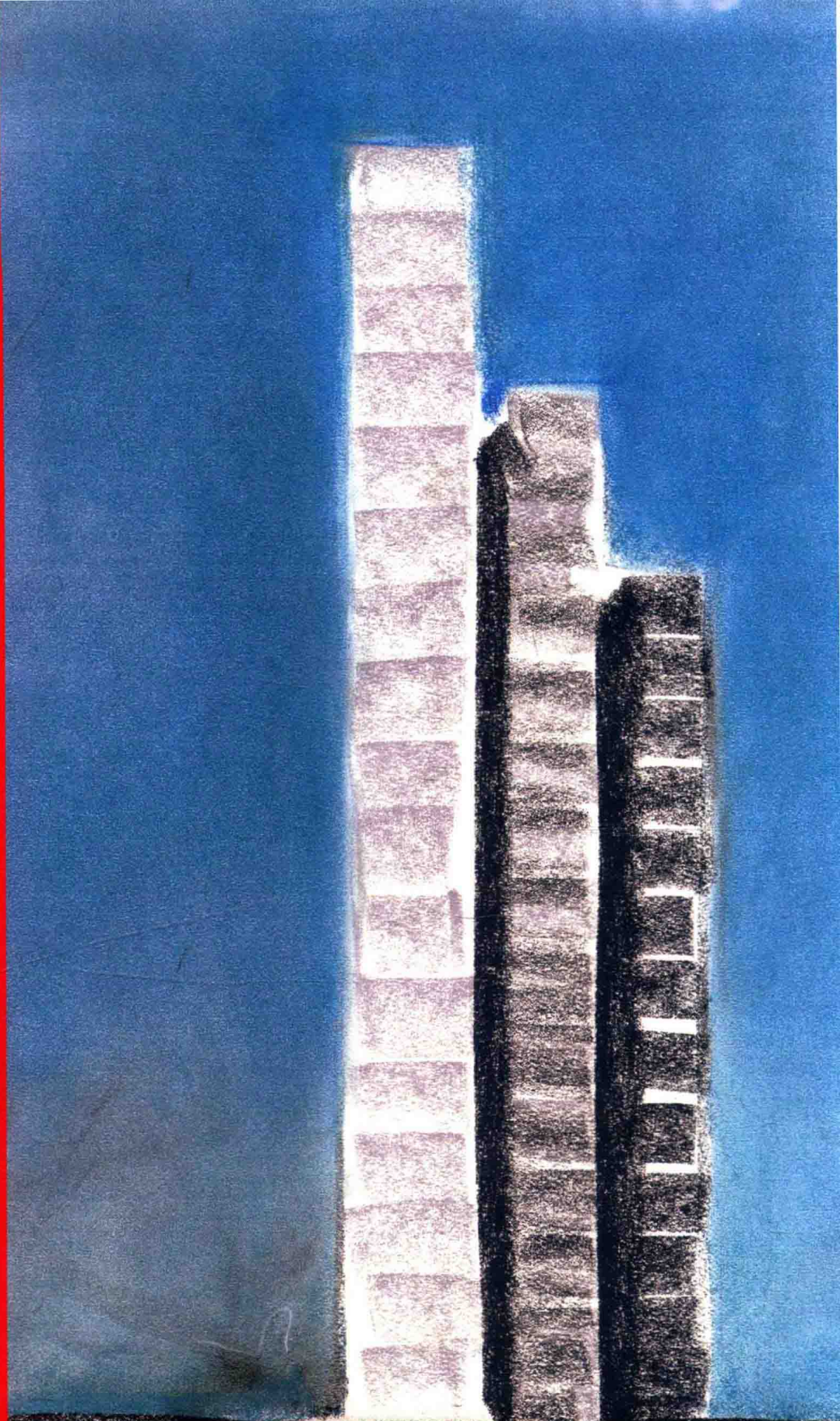
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# INTRODUCTION

The initial vision for CityCenter grew out of a small meeting in February 2004. MGM Resorts International President, Chief Financial Officer, and Treasurer Jim Murren called me into his office to discuss his ideas for creating a world-class resort on a parcel of company land between Monte Carlo and Bellagio on the Las Vegas Strip. He envisioned a mixed-use project encompassing urban streets and parks, multiple hotels, convention centers, luxury retail stores, condominiums, office buildings, and an extensive art program. He thought that the Strip needed a “center,” a place for people to visit and experience a modern city’s excitement. Jim directed us to be forward looking in the creation of a twenty-first-century city with environmental sustainability at its core.

Over the next seven months we hired a team of urban planners and created a master plan along with preliminary budgets and a timeline. As the master plan took shape, we realized that we were about to embark on the creation of the single largest world-class destination resort—with an area of 18 million square feet—in only sixty months. We subsequently received approval from the MGM Board of Directors to begin the selection process of its architects and designers.

To fully grasp the magnitude of creating CityCenter, you must imagine the necessary coordination of the countless activities that accompany concurrent



design and construction of separate buildings, along with that of complex road, bridge, and utility infrastructure and a highly efficient central plant. Our master plan called for the separate engagement for each structure of a world-class architect, consultants, contractors, subcontractors, vendors, suppliers, and property managers. Project-wide communication would be key, requiring monthly executive meetings, often with over a hundred people in attendance, and countless more informal coordination meetings each day. The cash flow needs and the construction accounting requirements for CityCenter were equally daunting, with hundreds of millions of dollars to be accounted for, and paid out, nearly every month. Finally, we knew that from the venture's outset the daily movement of materials and of nearly 12,000 construction workers to and from a limited site would present unprecedented logistical challenges 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. CityCenter would test everyone!

*Creating CityCenter* provides an illustrated journey through the genesis and execution of the largest privately financed building project in U.S. history. The book's photographs capture each development phase, from study models and concept renderings to construction and openings.

This book also features profiles of key individuals who participated in CityCenter's formation. Their stories convey the excitement and major challenges involved in its construction. In most cases, CityCenter was the largest undertaking in their professional careers.

We wrote *Creating CityCenter* to provide you with an insider's view of the conception, construction, and operation of this mega-project. It includes spectacular photographs taken during the course of the project, as well as keen, firsthand insights recounted directly by those who participated in the daily management process. This book is a tribute to the thousands of individuals who made CityCenter possible. Without their commitment and dedication, CityCenter would not be open and thriving today.

We organized the book's chapters chronologically, starting with the history and early development of Las Vegas. In the second chapter, we discuss MGM's evolution. The three following chapters cover CityCenter's master planning, construction, and architecture and interior design. The last two chapters focus on landscape architecture and CityCenter's opening activities with the operations team.



We invite you to read on and explore the exciting and intriguing story of *Creating CityCenter*. It is a tale filled with commitment, challenges, and plenty of high risk, as well as a tale of how MGM's daring vision and a team of professionals and workers created one of the most remarkable and stunning resorts in the world in only 1,825 days.

Welcome to CityCenter, but be sure to wear your hard hat—it is a busy job site!

BILL SMITH









## Chapter 1

# EARLY HISTORY OF LAS VEGAS

From the first settlers to brave its inhospitable climate in the early 1900s to the millions who visit its casinos each year, Las Vegas has always attracted and rewarded those who take a risk. Its history is a great American story, filled with luck and happenstance, and formed by pioneers of industry, engineering, and business. The city owes its transformation from desert oasis to gaming capital of the world to early federal projects such as the railroad, nearby Hoover Dam, and improved water sourcing, as well as to the persistence of its population growth, which closed the twentieth century as the largest in an American city founded in that century. Today, the 4.2-mile stretch of Las Vegas Boulevard known as “the Strip” is home to the largest hotel and casino resorts in the world, and a prime tourist destination. Winners and losers, innovation and failure, shaped a pattern of creative destruction that redraws the map of the Strip year after year.

There was a time when it was illegal to flip a coin in Nevada. On March 19, 1931, however, the state voted to legalize gambling and overturn a 1910 state law that had driven the industry underground. The country was in the grip of the Great Depression, which had led to population flight from this relatively young state and a tax deficit for its much-needed public schools. As the first state

Las Vegas’ first housing was 64 bungalow-style cottages, which were built in 1910 to house railroad workers. Though some of the cottages still stand, their original occupants were laid off en masse in the mid-1920s, when operations moved to Caliente, Nevada.







in the union to allow casino-style gambling, and with large-scale construction projects under way nearby, Nevada spent the remainder of the decade largely insulated from the effects of the crumbling national economy. Las Vegas was now—officially—in business.

The first seeds of the Strip were sown on April 3, 1941, when California hotelier Thomas Everett Hull opened the El Rancho Vegas Hotel on Highway 91. An instant success, the low-rise California Mission-style complex spanned 63 acres and featured 63 guest bedrooms, an outdoor swimming pool, a cocktail lounge, stores, a 250-seat dining room, and not least, a 300-seat casino. Its striking tower sign, topped by a neon-lit windmill, drew weary motorists and Hollywood stars alike, and its amenities were a mix of glitz and kitsch, with horse riding, a no-jacket-required evening dinner, and a featured live show by the “El Rancho Starlets” dance troupe, accompanied by a live orchestra.

The El Rancho was preceded by the club Pair-O-Dice (1930) and the roadhouse Red Rooster (1931) on the highway, but was the first facility to be built within the parameters of the Strip. It began a building boom that saw the Last Frontier, Flamingo, Club Bingo, and Thunderbird casino-hotels open by the decade's end, each more ambitious than the one before.

El Rancho's desert location inspired Texan resort and movie theater-chain owner R. E. Griffith and his nephew William J. Moore to open the Last Frontier Hotel one mile to the south on October 30, 1942. Griffith and Moore purchased the 35-acre 91 Club site (once the Pair-O-Dice), in an attempt to attract northbound motorists before they reached the El Rancho. Designed by Rissman & Rissman Architects, the Last Frontier tempted travelers with a roadside pool and front casino, and took El Rancho's Old West theme even further with Pioneer-style furniture and memorabilia in its courtyards and rooms, costumed staff, and rodeo riding. It later added an adjacent reproduction town named the Last Frontier Village, and the hotel became the site of Las Vegas' first wedding chapel, the Little Church of the West.

By the mid-1940s, Las Vegas' burgeoning resort industry had begun to attract the attention of organized-crime figures, among them New York's Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel. A lieutenant for crime boss Meyer Lansky and his associate Charles “Lucky” Luciano, Siegel had been charged with overseeing the outfit's national horseracing wire service in California before being redeployed

The famed “Welcome to Las Vegas” sign was designed by Betty Willis of the Western Neon Company and has been in place just south of Russell Road since 1959. On the back, it reads “Drive Carefully” and “Come Back Soon.” It was added to the National Registry of Historic Places on May 1, 2009.