



## Luck and the future of Casinos

# Is WinStar World the benchmark of tomorrow?

By Olivia Casey

As competition for gamers increases, so will the demand for luck-sensitive design and an environment that is geared toward making the customer “feel lucky,” or so says Dr. Desmond Lam, one of the world’s leading authorities on gaming, luck and gaming marketing. Recently, Dr. Lam met with Olivia Casey of ValueWorks Inc. to discuss what the future holds for gaming design and the successful resorts of tomorrow.

Ms. Casey, and her company, Value Works, Inc., under the direction of Larry Seitz of L.E. Seitz Designs Inc. and the design-build firm Aguirre Roden, recently assisted in the completion the WinStar World Casino in Thackerville, Okla. Owned by the Chickasaw Nation, the venue boasts not only the fifth-largest gaming floor in the world but an attention to the “lucky” aspect of gaming that goes beyond a casual nod to Feng Shui.

“Creating a space that was an Asian gambling destination was definitely part of our goal,” says Mr. Seitz, who worked closely with Ms. Casey’s China-based company to ensure every aspect was auspicious. Located within an hour’s drive of the significant Asian-American communities of Dallas and Fort Worth, and understanding the desire to entice those visitors to the location, Mr. Seitz and Ms. Casey took their research seriously. Nothing in the venue was left to happenstance.

Since opening on December 31, 2008, the casino has successfully hosted a number of targeted Asian events and indeed, a casual observer recently noted that there was plenty of action to be had on a Wednesday afternoon...definitely up from a year ago.

Although Dr. Lam has not personally visited the resort, he has seen extensive photographs and remarked that “the venue looks really interesting and goes beyond casino design...your concepts are definitely in-tune to the Chinese culture.” It was not only the Asian customer that the team was trying to appeal to, indeed, the appeal was meant to be universal in its application to the North Texas-Oklahoma location.

Could the casino, which is located on a desolate stretch of highway that snakes from Dallas to Oklahoma City and its design philosophy, be on to something here? Is it lucky?

  
**L. E. SEITZ**  
ASSOCIATES, INC.  
[www.larryseitz.com](http://www.larryseitz.com)

  
**VALUE WORKS**  
[www.valueworksinc.com](http://www.valueworksinc.com)

  
**AGUIRRE  
RODEN**  
[www.aguirreroden.com](http://www.aguirreroden.com)

The eight WinStar dragons were designed with an eye to making every aspect "lucky."



Mr. Seit maintains that the concept of "lucky" is not a single, static observance having to do with the traditional observation of door placement, or the holding of a rabbit's foot, but the entire experience of escape, abandonment and inclusion which goes beyond order and transcends into experience.

Or is it what can be considered the successful benchmark for the future of non-Vegas gaming destinations?

It could be both, according to the way Dr. Lam envisions the successful gaming venue of tomorrow. Dr. Lam sees the future as twofold – truly integrated resorts with multiple offerings to a variety of customers with multiple streams of revenue – and a focus on a gaming venues that provide the gamer with a value-add experience that includes "lucky" designs, an inherent, global sensitivity to quality and service and an acknowledgement to the changing customer demographics as younger players become more active in the casino community at large.

In other words, "lucky" is not just lucky but an attention to detail that encompasses basic design technique that includes environment, décor, quality and service.

Although Dr. Lam is specifically interested in Asian gaming and Asian behaviors, his studies indicate that most behavior patterns are not limited to a single region or group. It is true that while the Asian gamer is highly environmentally sensitive to the overall "luck experience," the concept maps well for any casino looking to maximize their investment in the future.

"People want to feel like they are in control of the environment," notes Dr. Lam. If an environment is deemed as "lucky" by the player they are more

inclined to gravitate to that location. Indeed a cursory glance at luck and gambling will yield a plethora of external "solutions" ranging from amulets and oils to a favorite "lucky" machine or preferred seat at a table. Different cultures may hold differing opinions on what is "lucky," but the importance cannot be ignored.

### More choice, more competition

Increasing numbers of gaming venues are offering the customer more choices with which to exercise their ability to choose. Competition will require a greater focus on what will bring customers back. Location will play a role, but in a competitive landscape, Dr. Lam thinks the successful venues will offer more.

"People want comfort...and something else," says Dr. Lam. For the individual casino, Dr. Lam points to the inclusion of "value add" design as providing the customer with something that intrinsically has little value but fulfills some other need that the gamer may have that confirms the "luck" of attendance. For the Asian gamers, that is reflected in what is "lucky," but the semantics of the issue reflect the same goal globally.

In Macau, there is the Wynn Resort's "Tree of Prosperity." Every half an hour or so, this tree emerges from its recess and there is a brilliant display of lights. It is considered by the Chinese that to witness this event will make you "prosperous." People have come to the casino just to see the tree! That is value add, explains Dr. Lam. The same can be said about the spectacular resorts on the Las Vegas Strip - Caesar's, New York New York, ..... giving people and experience with intangible value but an intrinsic value to entertain.

### Lucky WinStar is not just lucky

WinStar proves that the overall concept is not just for the big guys. Even during the bleak economic times, the casino continues to show returns above industry average.

WinStar proves that the overall concept is not just for the big guys.

Magnificent Beijing captures "lucky" with a focus on pattern and design that highlights Chinese traditional symbols of luck.

Some of it may indeed be location. However, Mr. Seitz believes that much of the success of WinStar has to do with the signature design and a specific "lucky" venue. He frames the issue somewhat differently, but his conceptual approach is the same.

He describes his business not technically just as design, but as "altered state design," which he translates to mean "how we transpose people from a normal life into a life they want to have...happy, glamorous, exciting...all of which equates to luck." The psychology is straightforward...if we have all of those things, and can escape the normal everyday problems faced by everyone, that is a moment of happiness, of luck. "Are you not lucky when you are happy," he asks?

Mr. Seitz, who has worked extensively with Feng Shui in the past and is no stranger to "lucky" design, maintains that the concept of "lucky" is not a single, static observance having to do with the traditional observation of door placement, or the holding of a rabbit's foot, but the entire experience of escape, abandonment and inclusion which goes beyond order and transcends into experience.

### Boulevard of Dreams

Overall, WinStar is organized around a quarter mile long boulevard that allows the gamer to escape into the great capitals of the world. Paris, Rome, Madrid and London – each encapsulates the cultural aspects of that city in the form of an interior fountain, as well as supporting design, that transports the player to a location far away from the arid Thackerville venue.

The Beijing Plaza, arguably the centerpiece of the entire project, offered unique design opportunities to the team.

This Asian-themed venue has become popular among all attendees with its open, yet intimate, design and elegant decor. Gaming tables flank a custom-made, 18-foot-high hand-carved, museum-quality marble statuary that serves as a fountain. Each of the intricately detailed panels couples classical Chinese design with numerology that provides "lucky" combinations to the players.

Above the venue are suspended eight 17-foot-long crystal dragon light fixtures





“Younger people expect a lot more than the older generation. The overall experience, the perceived value of the entertainment, is paramount to ensuring success.”

- Larry Seitz

(eight being a lucky number), each set playing with their lucky flaming pearls... also an auspicious symbol. Extreme care was taken in the selection of the colors, patterns, even the number of scales on the dragon, to ensure that the venue would be considered a “lucky” environment.

Given the increased number of Asian gamers populating the venue, it can be argued the perception is reality among the attendees to the venue. But Mr. Seitz claims it is more than just luck. It is overall quality of the work and the environment.

“The key is providing a place of comfort for everyone,” says Mr. Seitz. Other patrons may feel more “lucky” in the other plazas, where Seitz focused on creating a variety of environments that range from the isolated, where a person can hide away, to the show-piece location, appealing to someone whose ideal comfort level is front and center of the crowd. “People are not exactly alike... and it is a combination of different ingredients and environments which make people feel “lucky,” he explains.

As Dr. Lam notes, “the world over, superior quality will always be recognized.” Mr. Seitz agrees. “It goes to subtlety,” he explains. Much like sitting in the seat of a very fine car. “You may not be attuned to the gauge of the metal, or the hand-tooled leather seats, but inherently you feel the difference.” If you are in an environment that has a pleasing scent, enhanced colors, well-patterned carpet, real marble, you may not know the exact level but the experience of being in such an environment translates into how you really feel about yourself.

Like Dr. Lam, Seitz sees part of the success in the inherent entertainment value of the environment. “Part of being transported is distraction,” he says. WinStar takes that a step farther. Unlike most venues, which only provide live entertainment in discreet areas, the WinStar features an ongoing array of live entertainment as each of the fountains features a unique sound, water and light show. There are also ongoing acts that play throughout the week.

The value add is the constant stimulation for the gamer, says Seitz. By facilitating not only the environment, but also the experience, Seitz and his team believe they have expanded the overall level of player engagement into something truly groundbreaking.

## Demographics will play a role

Did a changing demographic also figure into the overall design aesthetic? As the older gamers retire and the younger generation steps in, would luck or the consideration of what is “lucky” still have relevance? Surprisingly, Dr. Lam’s research indicates that luck is even more important to the younger player than the more mature. He attributes this to the current pervasive feeling of instability and a desire to bring order, or some sense of certainty, to what is intrinsically an uncertain environment.

Dr. Lam maintains that as competition grows, the demand for quality service as part and parcel of the experience only grows greater, particularly for the second-tier casino, and that is partially driven by a younger demographic with increasingly high expectations. Mr. Seitz agrees. “Younger people expect a lot more than the older generation,” he explains. “The overall experience, the perceived value of the entertainment, is paramount to ensuring success.”

Is WinStar the benchmark for tomorrow’s casino? Only the numbers will tell for sure, but so far, the experts agree the WinStar World Casino is the closest thing to the future of gaming in the market today.

*Olivia Casey is a principal of ValueWorks Inc, with offices in Dallas and China. She can be reached at [oliviacasey@valueworksinc.com](mailto:oliviacasey@valueworksinc.com) or [www.valueworksinc.com](http://www.valueworksinc.com).*