

CEO: A downtown wanted

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3,000 or 4,000 lots, 110 acres of commercial and then the hotel was built.

Of course, not only was he probably terribly optimistic, he also had horrible timing. To start a project in 1926 or 1927 was not the right time, and I'm sure he went bankrupt.

When I got here, a lot of people kept saying, "The Village has lots of potential." It seems like it had lots of potential since the 1920s, but it hadn't been realized. If you will, the main street was Calle Estado, where I bought those three buildings. They used to have these street fairs.

I could tell there was this reservoir of sentiment where people wanted to have a downtown, someplace to meet, someplace that would be the center of town.

But there was no "there" there, if you will. There was no "here" here. There was no real downtown. We bought the land in 2001. Started construction in 2002. We opened in fall of 2003.

Were you nervous? Your background had been in home construction, and this was pretty ambitious for your first commercial project, it seems.

I was somewhat nervous, probably somewhat overconfident. There were more differences between commercial construction than residential than I had imagined. ...

There was a learning curve on the construction. Probably the bigger challenge was recruiting tenants, trying to make people understand my vision and then managing the expectations of tenants and customers, building the foot traffic — making it what it is today, which is La Quinta's Main Street.

We have everything from a bank to shoe repair to a coffee house to major restaurants with celebrity owners like Clint Eastwood and Bill Devane. We have four or five lawyers who have their offices here; we have two doctors here; we have insurance people; we have investment people. We have all the elements of a real

downtown Main Street.

What's your vacancy rate? And is it difficult finding tenants now?

It's obviously a challenging environment, and it has been for the last couple of years. We are 85 percent occupied and 15 percent vacant.

In any development, you're always going to have 5 percent vacancy even in the best economy. ...

There are lots of locations people have a choice to go to. What we provide versus other places is this personal contact. Leslie (Locken, leasing and property manager) is here every day. She's available to show space Saturday and Sunday. She's responsive on her cell phone.

There's a lot of landlords in the desert which are big corporations that own, and you're dealing with a leasing agent. They just don't have the financial incentives to return that call on Saturday at 4:30 in the afternoon, like Leslie does.

Although I live in Northern California, I'm here a couple times a month for two, three days. I'm very involved. All the tenants have my cell phone and know me personally.

I make a habit of doing my shopping, eating and banking here. It's not like some faceless corporate entity that owns the building. I think it helps me understand better some of the challenges they have.

Have you scaled back on your marketing at all?

We're spending more now on marketing than we were. There's going to be a billboard going up this month on I-10. We were doing TV last year. We've been doing print ads. We're going to do more and more events.

What can happen in a recession is that people tend to freeze and cut back. We're doing exactly the reverse. We've expanded our budget and the breadth of it. ...

Just recently, we've decided to buy every inbound American Airlines and Alaska Airlines ticket stub. It will have an Old Town on it. We're hitting the people as they're coming to the desert.

We're doing rack cards in hotels. We work very closely with concierges. We try to keep it in front of everybody.

Old Town hosts a lot of free events, especially during the season. What does that do for you?

We're doing movie nights. We do music nights out on the lawn. We are continuing to do Art Under the Umbrellas. Last year, sales were down, but we had record attendance.

The big thing last year was the farmers market on Sundays. It turned the slowest day of the week into the best day for retailers. I thought originally people would come. It helps put Old Town on the map and gets you in the habit of coming here. But I thought they would just come, buy their fruits and vegetables and flowers and go home.

But no. They really stayed and went to the restaurants for breakfast or lunch. They went to the coffee company, of course. They really did go into the shops. Sometimes they didn't buy that day, but they came back during the week. That was really big for us. It was something the city helped subsidize. It's something we helped subsidize.

I think we've established Old Town as a place to go.

It seems like there are many other 'Main Streets' in the desert that aren't having as much success achieving that mix. El Paseo has empty storefronts as does Palm Canyon Drive in Palm Springs.

What's the difference, in your opinion?

In a way, I don't really think there are a lot of Main Streets. Indio has an area that could be a Main Street, but it's so blighted that it isn't. Indian Wells has nothing. It has a shopping center that they call Indian Wells Village, but it's a shopping center. It has a Ralphs in it. El Paseo: I've never quite understood it. It's nicely done, but one of the big problems is there's no cohesive ownership. It's a series of individuals who own different buildings, and many of

them are people who have owned them for a long time, are older or out of the area.

So they don't have a real cohesive plan for fixing up buildings and I know the city's been working with them on that. But the main problem with me with El Paseo is that I've been going there 12 years, and I always get confused about where I am. ...

You've got to have it be fairly compact, dense and identifiable. We can have events because we own all of the buildings. I own Main Street. I can close it down when I want. You can't really shut down El Paseo.

I guess one of the other things to bring up — and I don't want to criticize them because they have a lot of good things they do over there — they have a lot of national and international chains. ...

They can be very sophisticated, but they also make snap decisions. They say, "We're going to close 50 locations around the country." And then boom. They close. I think that's what's sort of happening to El Paseo to some degree.

We don't have that, for better or worse. We have no national chains. Therefore, we're not subject to someone making a decision in Chicago or New York.

Wells L. Marvin

Born: Berlin, Germany

Background: Studied political science at the University of Oregon and attended Santa Clara University School of Law. He built his first home at age 19 and started a real estate company after finishing college. He practiced in real estate construction litigation, is a real estate broker and a general contractor.

Family: He and his wife, Karen Marvin, have been married 21 years and have two children.

On his office wall: Family photos and painted impressions of a child's small hand prints on a Father's Day gift.