

L.A.'s Downtown Revival Attracts Events

By Michael Goldstein

JANUARY 20, 2009 -- The new heart of downtown is L.A. Live, a \$2.5 billion campus designed for conventions, meetings, and special events. At L.A. Live, the newly opened Grammy Museum, Club Nokia, and the Conga Room club—co-owned by Jennifer Lopez and Jimmy Smits—join the 7,000-seat Nokia Theatre and Staples Center, and are linked by the light-filled Nokia Plaza, where Britney Spears lit the Christmas tree this past year.

"We've sold the Nokia Theatre six times already for Microsoft, Herbal Life and Siggraph for general sessions and events," said Michael Krouse, senior VP of sales for LA Inc., the city's convention and visitors bureau.

Lucky Strike Lanes, the Farm of Beverly Hills, ESPN Zone, Fleming's Prime Steakhouse, and Lawry's Carvery join an already wide range of downtown dining options. There are 100 restaurants and bars within a few blocks of the convention center.

A pair of upcoming high-level—literally and figuratively—hotels will add to the mix. The JW Marriott Hotel at L.A. Live, scheduled to open in 2010, will feature 878 guest rooms along with 77,000 square feet of indoor meeting space, including three floors of stacked ballrooms.

The Ritz-Carlton Los Angeles, a 123-room hotel in the same 54-story tower as the Marriott, will feature a 3,400-sq.-ft. club lounge, a 24th-floor lobby lounge, a restaurant with panoramic views, and an outdoor rooftop swimming pool.

With all this activity, "we booked 26 shows in the second quarter of 2007 for future years, while in second-quarter 2008, 31 shows were booked," Krouse said.

The Los Angeles Convention Center's green technology helps. "It's the first existing building to receive LEED certification. We've been solar-powered for 10 years, and 10 percent of our power is produced from renewable sources," according to Krouse.

The videogaming trade show E3, which haddownsized to a hangar at Santa Monica Airport, has gone back to taking over the Los Angeles Convention Center for this year, 2010 and 2011. "Los Angeles is the entertainment capital of the world, and videogaming continues to lead this charge," Krouse said. E3 will bring the city 33,000 room nights and 60,000 attendees.

But the not-so-secret weapon, Krouse said, is the venue's discount program: "A show like E3 doesn't pay rent on the building because the 33,000 room nights reduce the rent to zero."

While Krouse acknowledged the economic slowdown, he said Los Angeles is a bargain from a hotel perspective. "Our pricing is more economical than San Diego, New York, San Francisco or Anaheim," he said. Planners also can get help from LA Inc. for transportation, marketing and public relations, and advertising.