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VAIL VALLEY MAGAZINE

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ARRABELLE IS AT THE CENTER OF THE REFACING OF LIONSHEAD.

A NEW LEASE ON Lionshead

AS THE CONSTRUCTION DUST SETTLES, A WORLD-CLASS REDEVELOPMENT EMERGES

BY ANDREA LOPEZ

It's a joke among Vail locals that the official town bird should be the crane. But people aren't talking about the lanky bird with the long beak. They're talking about a construction crane – a massive, towering, lattice of steel that has dominated the Vail landscape for several years now.

In fact, it's not uncommon to see anywhere from a few to a dozen at one time in town. The multi-colored machinery has been in place to assist with more than $1 billion in construction projects by private business owners and more than $15 million in projects by the town. They're simply part of the landscape right now, a New Dawn, also referred to as Vail's Billion-dollar Renewal.

To say that Vail is getting a facelift is an understatement. "Vail is in the midst of an unprecedented revitalization," said Kris Friel, Vail Community Information Specialist.

ANDREA LOPEZ

CRANES HAVE DOMINATED THE VAIL LANDSCAPE FOR SEVERAL YEARS.

Lionshead's new look

This massive construction boom got off to a strong start about seven years ago when the town adopted the Lionshead Redevelopment Master Plan in 1998. This master plan was assembled to encourage redevelopment within the Lionshead commercial core near the Eagle Bahn Gondola, one of three key areas that generates a majority of money for the town.

"At the time, the community recognized that Lionshead lacked the economic vitality of Vail Village and was failing to offer the world-class resort experience our guest and visitors had come to expect of the No. 1 ski resort destination in North America," said George Ruther, Vail's director of community development. "Sales tax collections from Lionshead were declining in large part due to poor retail quality, deteriorating buildings and infrastructure, an ailing pedestrian environment and less than average architecture."

The majority of the Lionshead redevelopment is being done by Vail Resorts, as it's one of the gateways to the ski area. Renaming it Vail Square, the freshly-built amenities include a complex of four buildings referred to as Arrabelle, home to 36 luxury hotel rooms and 50 condos based on an early 19th century German architecture movement called the Biedermeier design style. It embraces simplicity, elegance and functionality. What's also new is a variety of high-end retail shops, ski storage, the Resort Information Center, a Vail Snowsports School Children and Teens location, a public skating rink in the center of the square, plus a movie screen. There's a traditional Germanic Glockenspiel, a 10,000-square-foot full-service RockResorts Spa and a French brasserie-inspired mountainside restaurant called Centre V.

The square, which is adjacent to the gondola at the western base of Vail Mountain, is a modern metamorphosis of the old Lionshead. The buildings tower over visitors, engulfing them in a pseudo-European village. The village floor resembles cobblestone. The buildings are unique and stand in contrast with one another, featuring bold and colorful finishes, along with decorative shutters, copper gutters and rooftops, flower stenciling on building faces, and a mixture of rod iron and wooden balcony railings. The look aims to reflect that of the European Alps, with architectural inspiration from Prague, Salzburg and Innsbruck.

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Over in Vail Village, the town launched the Vail Streetscape Project. Construction was done in carefully-timed phases, in the spring and fall, to reduce the impact to visitors and businesses during peak times. The goal was to enhance the look of the town's core, to make it more pedestrian friendly, and to enhance the European ambiance. The work cost $12 million.

Finishing touches are now in place on Bridge Street, Gore Creek Drive, Hanson Ranch Road, Willow Bridge Road and East Meadow Drive. What people will notice and enjoy are heated pavers, which eliminate ice-covered walkways, decorative water features, fire pits, an abundance of gorgeous flowers in new planters displayed in the summer months, recycling containers, and pieces of art aimed at encouraging lounging and lingering in the village. Key landmarks were also renovated, including the Children's Fountain, the Gore Creek pedestrian bridge and Pirateship Park. More enhancements are to come, and the entire project won't be finished until 2009.

Responding to guests

Approximately 30 major public and private development projects have been in the works throughout Vail since the construction boom kicked off, most of which will be finished around 2010, barring any new projects that might come up in the meantime.

About half of Vail's downtown core will be redeveloped. The town was established in 1966 at the base of Vail Ski Resort, which opened in 1962. So much of its original infrastructure is aging and outdated; renovations are wanted in order to stay competitive with other resort communities. Vail hosts more than 1.5 million visitors to the ski slopes in the winter alone; it doesn't want to lose those guests! Guest

surveys also revealed they wanted more spacious accommodations, luxury amenities, and more things to do off of the ski slopes.

"These conditions, compounded by the realization that our resort competitors were spending millions of dollars annually to update and improve their facilities and the trend of skiing guests to spend less time on the mountain and more time in town shopping, dining and enjoying other off-mountain activities, caused the town to take action to improve the conditions of Lionshead," said Ruther.

ANTLERS AT VAIL - BEFORE

ANTLERS AT VAIL - AFTER

Many private businesses got swept up in the construction frenzy and excitement of a new look, and decided it was a good time to renovate their buildings.

"I purchased the old Swiss Hotel from the Sonnenalp Resort," said Bob McNichols of Daedalus Real Estate Advisors, also the owner and developer of One Willow Bridge Road. That's a $100 million luxury-condominium project with 22 residences, 10 of

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which are whole ownership and 12 of which are fractional ownership. The property features state-of-the-art amenities as well as exclusive resort management services by the world-famous Sonnenalp Resort of Vail.

"Once the plans for One Willow Bridge Road were finalized, we tore down the old hotel and began construction on our project. The value of the project was over $100 million. One Willow Bridge Road replaced an old hotel built in the late 1960s that was functionally and economically obsolete and a gross underutilization of the site for its location and potential."

In 2003, things really started to get busy. That year, the town of Vail issued permits for $94.2 million worth of construction. It was the busiest year in the town's history. Expansion of Vail Mountain School was one of the town's most prominent projects that year. Things didn't slow down. Vail set another record in 2004, issuing permits for over $155.5 million worth of projects. In 2005, the town trumped that number, issuing permits for more than $245.5 million worth of projects. The following year yielded more than $355.3 million in permit valuations, and 2007 holds the current record with more than $496 million worth of construction projects approved and in the works. Some of the most expensive projects recently approved and under way include the Four Seasons, valued at $89 million, and the Ritz-Carlton Residences, projected to cost $110 million.

"The Antlers was generally unattractive and less competitive as time went on," said Rob LeVine, general manager of the Antlers at Vail, which underwent $20 million in renovations. "It was obvious that we needed a more pleasant curb appeal as well as upgraded common areas ... having a new,

ONE WILLOW BRIDGE ROAD IS RECOGNIZED AS HAVING THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF QUALITY AND OWNER SATISFACTION OF ANY PROJECT IN VAIL.

attractive reception area is one more little thing that helps set the tone for an entire vacation. The same is true for a myriad of aesthetic improvements. Beyond that, a heated garage, versus outdoor parking with snow-covered cars, is a big plus."

Just last year, Vail's Design Review Board reviewed 722 applications; the Planning and Environmental Commission reviewed 78 applications. The town collected a record amount of money from these applications and development. In 2007 alone, redevelopment projects contributed $4.4 million in new net revenue. This money helps the town pay for things like additional improvements and maintenance.

"At this point in time, I'm not preparing for any reductions in staffing levels and the volume of work in the Community Development Department remains at an all-time high," said Ruther.

Some construction projects are so massive, they're becoming attractions themselves. Visitors and locals alike can be found peering through holes in fencing surrounding massive craters in the ground, trying to catch a glimpse of the work on the other side, their minds reeling with questions about the beautiful buildings that will eventually emerge from the pits. Some developers have even put in windows so that visitors can look in on their work.

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"I can't believe there's so much construction going on in such a poor economy," said Jeff Gurney, a visitor from the Denver area. "I've been impressed by the outcomes. There are some beautiful buildings."

Many businesses will tell you that you'll see grand improvements when the construction is complete, if you haven't already. "Our redevelopment at the Antlers started in April of 2000 when we closed the building and tore down what was a very substandard above-ground parking structure," said LeVine. "After excavating down two levels, we built a covered, heated parking garage. Above that garage we built 24 new condominiums, seven more units of employee housing and all-new lobby, offices, conference center, business center, fitness room, saunas, ski lockers and entry courtyard.

"In addition to all that new construction, we also renovated the existing building (72 condos) with new siding, new railings as well as fire sprinklers and new TVs, phone and Internet cabling in all the original condos. ... We tore down and rebuilt our swimming pool, deck, hot tubs and changing rooms. Other amenities ranging from an exercise room to a free business center, to two beautiful big hot tubs to help improve the overall guest experience. The brand new condominiums we built also filled a gigantic need. The demand for those was, and still is, enormous."

"We offer our residents a level of luxury amenities and service that was not available anywhere else in Vail Valley," said McNichols. "One Willow Bridge Road is now recognized as having the highest level of quality, interior design, technology and owner satisfaction of any project in Vail. I am most proud of the interior details within the building. Everything from the floor plans to the furnishings to the technological conveniences to the art collections to the amenities to quality not usually found in this kind of project. I don't think there is a detail we missed. When you compare projects, it's always the details that make the difference."

Ever-'green' Vail

Vail Resorts is also planning what it's calling the "largest green resort village in North America." It's called "Ever Vail," located in an area that was called West Lionshead. The $1 billion base area will serve the western edge of Vail Mountain. The site is 9.5 acres, and

the plan is to transform it into a "green" or environmentally-friendly, multi-use resort village. The finished project will have residences, a hotel, offices, retail shops, restaurants, a public parking garage, a new gondola and a public park among other amenities.

When finished, Ever Vail is expected to be the largest LEED-certified (The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) project for resort use in North America. There are strict guidelines to become LEED certified. It's a third-party verification that the building project meets the highest green building and performance measures. It means the construction is environmentally responsible, profitable and a healthy place to live and work.

For example, the Ever Vail project will use local trees killed by pine beetle infestation. Small hydroturbines in the nearby Gore Creek will provide energy to light public areas and gray water from snowmelt will be used for toilets and washing ski area equipment like snow-grooming machines. The company hopes to begin selling real estate there next year.

"The mission of Vail Resorts is to provide exceptional experiences at our extraordinary resorts," said Rob Katz, chief executive officer of Vail Resorts. "What we are announcing with the Ever Vail development is complete-

ANDREA LOPEZ

THE CHILDREN'S FOUNTAIN IS A KEY LANDMARK IN VAIL VILLAGE.

ANDREA LOPEZ

MOST OF THE PROJECTS ARE SCHEDULED TO BE COMPLETE IN 2010.

ly aligned with two of our most important stakeholders — the spectacular natural environment that serves as the backdrop of Vail Mountain and the local community in which we operate."

While all this construction is going on, some guests have had to change the way they maneuver around town and get to the ski slopes. While some walkways are blocked, temporary routes have appeared. "Two obstacles are at Vail during the construction," said Gurney. "First, it can be crowded near the lift because there's so much construction by one particular walkway. Also, it can be frustrating when construction workers take all of the close-in parking in the garages and skiers are left to park on the street."

Some businesses anticipated taking a financial hit during this time because of the construction obstacles. Bill Anderson, general manager of Lion Square Lodge, anticipated sales being off as much as 40 percent during the adjacent Arrabelle construction. "But we actually weathered the storm fairly well and saw impacts mainly in the summer months." Lion Square Lodge itself is undergoing a $20 million renovation.

Chris Manning of The Swedish Log Cabin/Tessa Clogs of Vail said, "We definitely saw fewer people in our section of town – Lionshead – with all the construction going on." The business leases space in a building that is scheduled to be torn down in a year or so. "For us, we continued to run our business the same with maybe more emphasis on our wholesale and Internet business."

But according to the town, the construction hasn't deterred visitors as a whole. Sales tax revenues have been steadily rising since 2003. In fact, the town collected a record $18.9 million in 2007, setting a record for the fourth consecutive year in a row. It anticipates that 2008 will bring in $19.4 million, which would be a 3 percent increase over 2007.

"Honestly, I don't remember it being that bad," said Greg Roberts, a visitor from San Diego who was in Vail for a few days in February. "I don't remember any of our decisions being impaired by the construction at all, but we would basically park in the morning, ski all day, come down for a drink and then head back to our condo and have dinner. We didn't really get out much past that. I think we were sort of clueless of the whole thing. What are the projects?"

Looking ahead

In the end, this public-private partnership to rejuvenate the town of Vail should reveal a refreshing new landscape to both locals and visitors.

"Vail has the vision of being the premier mountain resort community," said Ruther. "Our guests and year-round residents benefit by enjoying a community based in some of the finest outdoor recreation opportunities in the United States that maintains a small-town feel with big-city amenities. The new projects will continue to create and further enhance our community goal of providing full year-round vitality and attraction and ensure economic sustainability."

"All these improvements are overdue and will create interest in Lionshead again," said Anderson.

Some guests and locals have expressed apprehension about the future. "What I seem to hear from folks that visit us in our store is the feeling of love and hate," said Manning. "Folks all agree that the new construction [Arrabelle] looks wonderful but is it Vail, or are we becoming Beaver Creek? Our customers are hoping that we and other small unique stores do not get pushed out of Vail because of coming construction, or that all the property just becomes too expensive for a family business to justify the increasing rents."

"I think just the overall expense of Vail in general would make me think twice [about coming back], not anything dealing with construction," said Roberts. "We've been coming out to Colorado for years, usually to different mountains, and I think Vail was the most expensive trip. I really do like the mountain though, and it is in a more convenient location compared to some of the other resorts."

"It's only temporary," Gurney said and the construction wouldn't deter him from making ski trips in the near future.

Many guests and locals have asked when all of the construction will be finished. There isn't an end date, according to town officials. This year is expected to exceed 2007 when it comes to record amounts of cash being spent on renovations and new construction. Vail's new look will clearly take, not only millions and millions of dollars, but time as well. ◆

Andrea D. Lopez is a broadcast journalist and mountain newsroom reporter for KCNC-TV, the CBS affiliate in Denver. She lives in Summit County.