

The Case of Atlantic City: Redevelopment Strategies for a Hospitality Centered Market

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ABSTRACT

Atlantic City, New Jersey, has been known as the East Coast Gaming Capital. The destination was once heralded as the mecca of casino destinations yet over the years has found itself struggling to maintain a healthy economic balance. In recent years, Atlantic City has experienced significant challenges and failures, such as the closing of Bader Field, multiple casino-hotel closures, and unstable government — making the destination a target for revitalization and redevelopment. The purpose of this industry commentary article is to identify and evaluate Atlantic City's current redevelopment strategies and investigate similar contexts including Camden, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan, to identify best practices to support Atlantic City redevelopment efforts. Research shows successful destinations have purposefully engaged and leveraged connections in the areas of diversity, economic growth, urban policy development and tourism planning to build a more sustainable economic ecosystem.

Keywords

Hospitality, redevelopment, government, diversity, Atlantic City, urban renewal, tourism planning

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality and tourism industry has experienced several disruptions in the United States, ranging from economic uncertainty to natural disasters to, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in hospitality-dense urban areas struggling to maintain crucial local businesses and (in some cases) residents. This is the case of Atlantic City, a coastal resort city with attractive beaches, a historic Boardwalk, and a reputation as the East Coast Gaming Capital. The destination has historically experienced significant challenges and failures despite reinvestment and planning attempts, such as the closing of the Bader Field airport, multiple casino-hotel closures, and an unstable government. Like most governments, Atlantic City relies on property taxes, with casinos generating approximately half of the city's total budget. However, with the casino closures, Atlantic City experienced unprecedented declines in taxable gambling revenue and property, falling from \$20.5 billion in 2010 to \$7.3 billion in 2015 (City of Atlantic City, 2015). Additionally, casino temporary closure orders and occupancy restrictions due to COVID-19 continued to devastate the city. As such, the destination has been a target for various urban renewal programs and projects.

Recent research has shown there is a direct link between urban policy development and tourism planning related to hotel accommodation and resorts, the very landscape of Atlantic City (Lim, Zhi, & Koo, 2019), as well as a positive correlation between diversity and economic growth potential (Rodríguez-Pose, & Von Berlepsch, 2018). To develop a more sustainable economic ecosystem, cities have begun to focus on leveraging urban development and tourism management synergies to diversify tourism offerings and create various forms of entertainment, recreation, and leisure to attract visitors (Benghadbane & Khries, 2020). Atlantic City is engaged with numerous development activities to contribute to its growth post-pandemic. James Plousis, chairman of the New Jersey Casino Control Commission, said (as cited in Fazelpoor, 2023, para. 2), “Year-end results show these efforts are paying off. Casino win not only surpassed pre-pandemic levels, it reached its highest figure in nine years.”

The purpose of this industry commentary article is to identify and evaluate current Atlantic City redevelopment strategies and investigate similar contexts, including Camden, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan, to identify additional considerations and best practices to support Atlantic City redevelopment efforts and contribute to the long-term sustainability of the destination.

INDUSTRY CONTEXT

Gambling was legalized in New Jersey in 1976, and Atlantic City quickly became known as the East Coast Gaming Capital. Atlantic City has leveraged its beaches alongside massive brick-and-mortar casinos; however, this has left the region with a lack of economic diversification. According to Erkuş-Öztürk and Terhorst (2018), single-asset tourism places are vulnerable to economic fluctuations and often experience slow growth as a result. Over the decades, nearby states including Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland have developed casinos. As a result, the region has experienced increased competition, market saturation, and economic instability on top of other disruptions unique to Atlantic City, contributing to a rotating network of casino properties and five casino closures ultimately stunting the destination’s growth and stability. Chris Christie, former governor of New Jersey, said, “Atlantic City is not a monopoly anymore, there’s 40 other states that have gambling, we have to do something different” (CBS NYC, 2014). Despite these challenges, the casino resort destination has continued to evolve to provide luxury to basic economic accommodations, numerous food and beverage outlets, nightlife, and entertainment options that attract 27 million visitors per year, making it one of the most popular destinations in the U.S. (VisitNJ.com, 2022).

Atlantic City’s population is approximately 38,466. The population per square mile is 3,577.8, with a total island square mileage of 10.76. The Hispanic/Latino demographic represents 32.8% of the population, followed by Black or African American at 32.3%, white alone at 25.9%, and White non-Hispanic at 15.3%, according to the 2020 Census. Of the 38,466 residents, 30.8% (11,540) are foreign-born. According to the Department of Labor, the unemployment rate of Atlantic City is 5.8% as of February 2023 and the median household income (in 2021 dollars) is \$29,773. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of the population lives below the poverty line. Eighteen percent (18.4%) hold a bachelor’s degree or higher. The low household income and high unemployment percentage suggest a higher uneducated workforce compared to surrounding areas. Additionally, year-round residents rely on the resort casinos for employment, with Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa alone employing 5,833 people (Zippia, 2022). Borgata is one of nine casino-hotel resorts; collectively the casinos employ over 23,466 people (O’Connor, 2022). Although

not all of Atlantic City's residents are employed by the casino industry, the residents do rely on the industry for jobs. Likewise, the industry can benefit from employing a diverse workforce.

Erkuş-Öztürk and Terhorst (2018) state “assets on which the competitive advantage of tourist cities is based are highly variegated and can range from one dominant single asset such as sea, sun and sand to a broad mix of different assets such as a historical urban landscape, museums, (liberal) atmosphere, shopping centers, restaurants and sex, among others” (p. 422). As of December 2022, Atlantic City has nine casinos. Together, these properties contribute more than \$232 million in gross gaming revenue taxes as reported in 2019, and casinos captured \$5.21 billion in gaming revenue in 2022 (Fazelpoor, 2023; New Jersey Casino Revenue Fund Advisory Commission, 2019). Caesars, Harrah's, and Tropicana are owned by Gaming and Leisure Properties Inc. and Caesars Entertainment Inc. According to PlayNJ (2022), MGM Resorts owns the greatest grossing property, Borgata. Golden Nugget is owned by Landry's Inc., and Resorts is owned by DGMB Casinos. Borgata, Golden Nugget, and Harrah's are in the Marina District. Bally's, Caesars, Resorts, and Tropicana are on the Boardwalk along with Ocean Casino Resort, which is co-owned by New York hedge fund Luxor Capital Group, and Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City, which is owned by Hard Rock International. In 2003, Tanger Outlets The Walk opened with 109 retail shopping stores stretching several blocks near the Boardwalk casinos; Bass Pro Shops opened in 2015. These additions have helped diversify the economic base of Atlantic City as well as attract more tourists to the destination. Atlantic City is also the home of Jim Whelan Boardwalk Hall and the Atlantic City Convention Center, responsible for bringing several groups to the market with nearly 300,000 people attending shows each year (Boardwalk Hall, 2022). Similarly, growth of construction, accommodation, food services and restaurant activities, and retail in other destinations have been attributed the most to national economic growth; however, they are also the most competitive sectors compared to national and regional values (Erkuş-Öztürk & Terhorst).

DISCUSSION

Research has demonstrated a positive correlation between diversity and economic growth potential (Rodríguez-Pose & Von Berlepsch, 2018). Yet the proximity between popular tourist attractions and residential communities in Atlantic City has resulted in challenges over the years (Rutala Associates, 2022). In some cases, demolitions associated with planned projects have resulted in vacated and deteriorating buildings and open spaces in neighborhoods (Rutala Associates, 2022). The lack of economic diversity in the region has also been a deterrent for attracting new business ventures. According to Can and Gozgor (2018), “in order to provide sustainable growth, policy-makers should pay attention to expanding tourism market diversification” (p. 1167). According to Christie, since 2014 gambling can be done in 40 out of 50 states with Atlantic City losing the luxury of monopolizing the industry and gambling revenues falling by nearly half (CBS Evening News, 2014; Perkins, 2014). Additionally, the city endured financial challenges for a time, resulting in a state takeover in 2016. In 2021, Gov. Phil Murphy signed a bill extending the state's oversight of decision-making power in Atlantic City for four additional years (Parry, 2021).

Atlantic City Challenges

Transportation infrastructure is a critical consideration for any destination. “Bader Field, which closed in September 2006 after 96 years of aviation use, gave the world the term ‘airport’ when a local reporter used the word in a 1919 article” (Parry, 2022, para. 13). Bader Field was an airport designed for smaller lightweight personal aircraft such as the DeHavilland DHC-7, as well as seaplanes designed to take off and land using inflatable pontoons. The larger, more long-distance turbo prop airplanes were directed to land six miles away at Atlantic City International Airport since Bader Field only offered two runways that were too short for larger aircraft (Finlay, 2022). Accordingly, the short runways limited the size of aircraft the facility could support and eventually forced US Airways to move from Bader Field to accommodate its Airbus A380 (Finlay, 2022). The airport slowly became less popular as the years progressed, with fewer airline companies using the airspace, leading to the closure in September 2006 (Finlay, 2022). The closing impacted the total number of travelers to the region as the closing of Bader Field required redirecting travelers from John F. Kennedy International Airport, Philadelphia International Airport, and LaGuardia Airport. Despite Atlantic City International being within proximity, Atlantic City has become more easily accessible by car, with the option to use public transportation such as NJ Transit.

In another example, Ocean Casino Resort, formerly known as Revel Casino Hotel, is considered the largest and most expensive failure in the region, costing \$2.4 billion in losses (CBS Evening News, 2014). This business was originally designed for families, promising a lavish waterslide and many family-oriented amenities as well as a second tower on the north side. Figure 1 (Google, 2021) is an aerial view of the property with only one tower, no waterslide, and an incomplete second tower built only up to the main building’s rooftop garden. Figure 2 is a 3D sketch rendering of the full property design. This photo was taken from Bright Sun Films (Bright Sun Films, 2020). This project has demonstrated unsecured funding can negatively impact the future of a business, the customers it attracts, and how revenue gets allocated back into the city.

Figure 1: Ocean Casino Resort



Figure 2: Revel 3D Sketch Rendering



The government of Atlantic City has also contributed to the city's failures. The city lost control of municipal services to the state "in November 2016 under Republican Gov. Chris Christie and a Democrat-controlled Legislature that concluded the city either could not or would not make the painful choices necessary to get its fiscal house in order" (Parry, 2019, para. 14). This statute was to last five years, concluding in 2021 (Parry, 2019). The statute gave the state the power "to overturn decisions of the city council, override or even abolish city agencies and seize and sell assets, including the city's much-coveted water utility" (Parry, 2019, para. 12). The purpose of the overturn in power was to make the hard decisions the local council could not make as well as implement a revitalization plan within five years. Today, Atlantic City is now nearly seven years into the state takeover and most of the planned strategies initiated in 2016 are incomplete and require additional funding.

These are but three of several failures that have defined Atlantic City over the last two decades. However, they each demonstrate efforts that have ultimately contributed to the city's current state and the need for more collaborative and intentional urban policy development and planning to diversify tourism to attract visitors (Benghadbane & Khries, 2020; Lim, Zhi, & Koo, 2019). Furthermore, the challenges of allocating money have manifested what Rodríguez-Pose & Von Berlepsch (2018) described as polarization or segregation: the inability of groups (community, business, and local government) to come together. As the city continues to struggle, this will negatively impact local businesses, residents, and discourage visitation to the destination as well as impact the city's ability to support and retain the diversity of its people. As such, Atlantic City has now embarked on a more consolidated effort to promote growth and redevelopment.

Atlantic City Redevelopment Efforts

In the city's most recent efforts, \$60 million in taxpayer money has been allocated to a variety of institutions and infrastructures necessary to revitalize the city. According to Bret Johnson (2022), they include:

\$43 million in direct state aid to Atlantic City — including \$2.15 million to help fund the local government's day-to-day operations, \$2 million for an anti-violence program to help children have a safe summer, and \$9 million for an infrastructure project to improve drainage along Route 40. \$16.6 million in transitional aid to the city from the last state budget — including \$5 million to install surveillance cameras across the city to improve public security, \$3.9 million for public works projects, \$1 million for

boardwalk repairs, \$1 million to expand the boardwalk and make it more accessible to the handicapped, \$1.3 million for two new fire engines, \$3 million to help improve the energy efficiency of local buildings, and \$5 million to help the city apply for a federal grant to help control flash flooding.

At a glance, this funding seems substantial and appropriate and demonstrates a strong commitment of the state to the city, residents, and businesses. Correspondingly, Atlantic City will receive nearly \$60 million from Murphy for needed revitalization described above (Johnson, 2022) and \$10 million from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. However, with a deeper investigation, less than \$4 million is allocated toward Atlantic City, due to splitting the funds with Newark, New Jersey, to support the Activation, Revitalization, and Transformation Program. The ARTP focuses on two key sub-programs: real estate rehabilitation and development, and public space activation. NJEDA, ARTP, and Murphy will supply over \$60 million (Nanette LoBiondo, 2022). In addition, the NJEDA supported the creation of the ARTP to help reactivate and revitalize Atlantic City (Lindner, 2022). The ARTP foundation will revitalize the north bay side of Atlantic City by building new parks, repurposing abandoned and/or empty lots. There is also a plan to build safer sidewalks and more public transportation by identifying bicycle lanes. The city was only recently approved for the Neighborhood Revitalization Tax Credit Program; the first NRTC plan in effect for the Inlet Neighborhood community (AtlanticCity.edu, 2022). There are a lot of moving parts that involve more funding allocation to destination/tourism infrastructure, and less to the ARTP to revitalize the island's neighborhoods.

The Inlet Revitalization Action Strategy was developed by “the Inlet Neighborhood Community Advisory Committee comprised of residents, community leaders, business owners and representatives from local institutions, the city, and the public at large” (Rutala Associates, 2022). The proposed action plan is to provide safer streets for commuters, cyclists, and pedestrians. Furthermore, revitalization of open lots involves using them as parks, rejuvenating the downtown bay area for 5,800 residences (Rutala Associates, 2022). These have been the first steps toward more positive engagement with the community. This will also help attract outside infrastructure to the area with more curb appeal for Atlantic City. More infrastructure drawn into the area will increase the city's economic welfare. With this amount of investment and development, Karolak (2014) suggests a branding analysis of the destination “to assess the impact of initiatives undertaken in recent years” (p. 108) to allow the government to consciously shape the destination's identity and promote it to potential markets, investors, and visitors.

Comparable Urban Area Redevelopment Practices

Camden, New Jersey, has used many of the techniques above to generate \$2.4 billion in the creation of a new district. Located west of Cherry Hill and east of Philadelphia, Camden has similar revitalization needs as Atlantic City. However, Camden has focused more on technology, earning it the label of a “Smart City” (Wiig, 2017). Camden's Smart City focuses on urban revitalization with the possibility of generating \$2.4 billion in investments via “the creation of new districts to attract multinational knowledge and innovation-focused industries” (Wiig, 2017). Technologies such as a “multi-instrument surveillance network” (Wiig, 2017, para. 404) would be implemented not to watch the people for crime but to understand “the ongoing, evolving relationship between global enterprise and municipal governance.” Camden's creation of the

new district promotes its Smart City growth by researching the relationships between global enterprises and municipal governments, and diversifying their economic base. This is a practice Atlantic City can consider to better understand the island's ecosystem of economic revitalization efforts with an eye toward future redevelopment.

The most recent plan to revitalize Atlantic City includes transforming Bader Field into a housing and retail development with a 2.4-mile auto racetrack. On March 23, Mayor Marty Small Sr. signed an agreement with DEEM Enterprises to redevelop the former airfield. The agreement provides DEEM six months to determine the feasibility of the project, which if successful will result in a payment to the city of \$115 million (Brunetti Post, 2023). The proposal resembles Camden's Smart City and Detroit's urban renewal practices, excluding the development of a racetrack, in that they reinvent space with housing and revenue opportunities within one walkable geographic area. This plan is also similar to Detroit's in that it incorporates residents' needs and wants, with residents having access to the space, including the racetrack. The plan will "focus on investing within the neighborhoods that surround the city and not just putting a focus on the tourist areas of downtown" (CW50, 2022). Detroit's urban renewal plan is considered a benchmark and example for future urban renewal projects around the country due to its incorporation of collaboration and public input (CW50, 2022). They are bridging the gap between the tourist districts and low-income housing by incorporating them within the same designed space. Accordingly, if one district receives funding, the other will equally receive the same intent of action. These plans are like what Erkuş-Öztürk and Terhorst (2018) discovered in their research: "In a tourism-dominated city, there is an ongoing process of diversification of economic activities that are directly and indirectly related to tourism" (p. 434).

CONCLUSION

It is suspected gaps between financial allocation and positive impact for residents in Atlantic City may be linked to key stakeholders such as the casino operators that have been responsible for generating much of the city's revenue. Atlantic City provides millions in revenue to the state; approximately \$2.75 billion in 2022 (Hill, 2022). Many of the resorts and facilities mentioned above are the first locations to benefit. Accordingly, the proximity between major tourist attractions and residential communities has resulted in disagreement and disappointment (Rutala Associates, 2022). The lack of economic diversity in the region has been a deterrent for attracting new business ventures to the area; the city is encouraged to seek economic activities that are directly and indirectly related to tourism (Erkuş-Öztürk & Terhorst, 2018). The city must purposefully engage and leverage its connections with regard to diversity, economic growth, urban policy development, and tourism planning to build a more sustainable ecosystem that will attract new businesses, visitors, and residents (Benghadbane & Khries, 2020; Lim, Zhi, & Koo, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose & Von Berlepsch, 2018). Planning must be supported by funding distributed to the city's efforts to support the current infrastructure as well as revitalize the surrounding neighborhoods.

Although Atlantic City has been run by the state for more than six years, officials need to be intentional and inclusive with residents while considering other revitalization best practices in similar areas (Parry, 2019). Camden and Detroit provide two examples in which by incorporating community engagement, the cities have leveraged diverse experiences and their actions have developed the potential for outside investors. In Atlantic City, support and infrastructure have

been prioritized but the voices of the residents are often unheard or deprioritized. Atlantic City needs to model efforts more closely to those successes of Camden's and Detroit's action plans of revitalization that included unity of government and residents' voices. Secondly, outside support and funding are needed beyond the government to bring people back into this destination resort city (Parry, 2022). With the plans and actions currently underway, the future of Atlantic City is promising.

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