

PRISA Group's entertainment complex at Puerto Rico Convention Center District set to go live

By Agustín Criollo Oquero on April 8, 2019



District Live! includes Aloft hotel, entertainment infrastructure, theaters, offices and even a zipline

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From the air, the view of PRISA Group's new project, District Live!, which stands prominently next to the Pedro Rosselló Convention Center in San Juan's Isla Grande community, is truly impressive and promises to be "the new heart of San Juan," PRISA CEO Federico Stubbe Jr. told Caribbean Business.

With less than a year to go before its planned opening at the end of 2019, construction is at an advanced stage. In fact, a first stage, which includes the process of leasing space for everything from media companies to booking events, was already commenced at what Stubbe believes will be the Caribbean's primary entertainment center.

“With this project, we are delivering a strong message that, after [Hurricane] María, Puerto Rico is re-emerging stronger than ever, with world-class infrastructure, and unique and authentic experiences that enhance the value and personality of our people and our culture,” Stubbe said. “This project will be on a great scale, something Puerto Rico has never seen, and we are sure the public will love it.”

Stubbe, who also serves as vice president of the Puerto Rico's destination marketing organization, Discover Puerto Rico, said the work to make the idea a reality has been titanic because the multi-use project includes spaces for musical entertainment, performing arts, plastic arts, natural recreational areas, a large-capacity theater, offices and other attractions, which he assures make District Live! a novel economic development model for the island and the Caribbean.



“The complexity of projects that have a multipurpose use like this one, combined with the great risk this type of project represents with the things that are happening and with the general

uncertainty that consumes Puerto Rico, has made the effort brutal. But, on the other hand, I can say I am super-excited about how this will turn out,” Stubbe said, explaining that his passion has always leaned toward the development of entertainment projects such as this one.

The developer stressed that District Live! will act as a catalyst for growth of Puerto Rico’s groups and conventions industry, which for many years has lagged due to inadequate infrastructure but began to improve significantly with the opening of the Convention Center in 2005, managed by AEG Worldwide.

What’s it all about?

Stubbe explained that the project has three anchor elements and a main attraction in the form of a modern theater with capacity for 6,000, which he said, will fill a need for midsize events and shows that currently can only count on Santurce’s Luis A. Ferré Performing Arts Center and Hato Rey’s Puerto Rico Coliseum as potential venue options in San Juan.

Regarding the theater, the developer explained how adaptable it is, calling it the perfect venue not only for music concerts, but also for boxing matches, fashion shows, banquets, galas, graduations, TV awards and similar events that will attract a foreign audience and foster tourism.

“The idea is for demand for places like this to increase. This space has state-of-the-art acoustics in the theater, which is something the [Puerto Rico] coliseum does not have and is necessary for the full experience. We have a 177-room Aloft hotel for young, cool people—those who want to be where the action is. We have Caribbean Cinemas VIP theaters, with 900 seats in eight theaters including a large-format one,” he explained.

In addition to these attractions, the impressive structure, which was built with an investment of more than \$150 million and is expected to contribute 2,075 direct and indirect jobs to the local economy, will also have other amenities such as a spacious lounge, balconies and stunning architecture, as well as a zipline that will connect the Convention Center and District Live! over the central plaza.

However, the emblematic anchor to the project, which they have dubbed “the public square of the future,” is built in a central space of 50,000 square feet, which will serve as the entrance portal to District Live!

“For the central square, we were inspired by New York’s Times Square, and it is an easily accessible public square. I say this is going to be the new center of San Juan,” Stubbe remarked. He further detailed that it will include a combined 15,000 square feet of screens throughout the complex, including a 4,000-square-foot screen, the largest in the Americas.

The developer assured this is not an exclusive, high-end project for a specific population, but what

is envisioned is the creation of a meeting point for the entire public, with an emphasis on Puerto Rico culture and its idiosyncrasies.

“This cannot be Disney World nor Universal [Studios, in Orlando, Fla.]. This is about who we are as Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rico, not as a place but as people. And that is why we are very focused on giving the place a lot of authenticity through experiences, not only architecture. That [Orlando experience] seems to me to be the wrong way to approach a project like this,” the developer explained. “District Live! will be an experience about music, dance, people, our beer, our rum, our Puerto Rican parrot, our nature, our coffee...that’s what it’s about.”

Stubbe also indicated there are numerous other amenities but preferred not to make them public yet. However, he revealed that an agreement was reached with a local broadcasting group that will establish its studio at District Live! allowing the public to see the station’s operations from the central square. He also announced that in 2021, District Live! will host the largest Think Planners convention in the United States.

A new city

The PRISA Group executive explained that the idea for the project evolved from building lodging projects across the island, the experience of which helped the developer to identify the public’s preference for experiences rather than simply places in which to stay overnight.

“When we did the Hyatt House [in the Convention Center District in San Juan], we saw that it went very well. So, we thought about using that same formula to continue building hotels of this type, but we rethought that plan because we realized from our experience at Dorado Beach, in particular, that people do not base their decisions about where they want to travel on where they will stay, but because of their experiences,” Stubbe said.

“When we saw the average length of stay in Puerto Rico, we saw it was only 2.6 room-nights, and compared with the competition, from South Florida to the Caribbean and Hawaii, it is four nights or more, minimum. Then, we were able to identify the challenge and the opportunity,” he added.

The developer assured that the Convention District represents a canvas for the company, a new infrastructure model for the island, “a new city,” he said.

“We believe in the value of new infrastructure that is designed to the needs of today’s and future consumers, not yesterday’s,” he said. “We studied the best in the world. We spoke with the best in the world, with companies that have developed these projects, and along the way defined what is needed in Puerto Rico, and we reached this definition.”

Stubbe emphasized that the project will allow Puerto Rico to project itself internationally as a strong tourism and business destination, not only for individuals, but also for groups and

corporations.

“For me, at a global level, this project will allow Puerto Rico to announce to the world that this is how it sees its future, with new world-class infrastructure—the message that we are going to [compete globally] in terms of tourism. It is a very powerful message that Puerto Rico is reborn from the catastrophe but stronger than ever and, frankly, we need it,” he said.

However, Stubbe stressed that District Live! is only one of a battery of infrastructure projects planned by PRISA Group, all aimed at revitalizing the island and opening more international tourism doors.

“We think big. In these days of global competition, one has to think big to break through the mold. The world is getting ever smaller with technology, and it seems to us that this is only the beginning of a broader development in the whole area of infrastructure for the development of entertainment and tourism and of a lifestyle,” he said.

Recent confirmed numbers reveal the scope and potential of the events industry on the island. For instance, during fiscal year 2014, the Luis A. Ferré Performing Arts Center was the venue for 456 functions that had a combined attendance of 251,171 people, and in fiscal 2015, 423 functions were held and attended by 232,659 people. Meanwhile, in the fiscal year ending June 30, 2016, the Puerto Rico Coliseum hosted 103 events, which saw a total of more than 700,000 guests and over \$35 million in gross ticket sales.