

# The Sands Casino Hotel in Atlantic City demolished

Sands Casino Hotel was demolished Thursday night. It took less than 20 seconds for the 21-story, 500-room tower to come crashing to the ground shortly after 9:30 p.m. in the first implosion of an East Coast casino.

The demolition makes way for a mega-casino to be built on the Sands site by Pinnacle Entertainment at an estimated cost of USD 1.5 billion to USD 2 billion. The as-yet unnamed complex is to open in late 2011 or early 2012.

As a fireworks display bathed the area in multicolored flashes of light and a public address system blared Sinatra crooning „Bye Bye, Baby,“ Governor Jon Corzine and Pinnacle chairman Daniel Lee pushed a wooden-handled plunger connected to a wire running to the building to set off the explosions.

A series of 17 loud booms echoed, tenths of a second apart. After a delay of about five seconds, the building keeled slightly to the northeast \_ exactly as demolition crews said it would \_ and collapsed on itself in a roar of debris and dust.

Rocky Merrill, the former chief engineer at the Sands, once had to cut doors into the walls of an entire floor of rooms so Sinatra and his pals could mingle without having to go out into the hallway. „It was a very homey place,“ he said. „Everybody felt at home there.“

When it opened in August 1980, the Sands was called the Brighton Hotel & Casino, taking its name from a popular Atlantic City hotel of days gone by. Standing outside the building among a crush of people waiting to get in on the first night was Lee, who had graduated from business school months earlier and landed a job with an investment bank that

financed casinos, though not the Sands.

Years later, as chairman and CEO of Pinnacle, Lee was on hand to watch the Sands come down on his 51st birthday. „This is the first building that I was in when it opened, and that I'll be there when it blows up,“ he said, and added that his new casino will meet the challenge of the new cutthroat competition in Atlantic City, where multibillion-dollar resorts are pushing older casinos out of business. The test, he said, is „to compete in this new world, or be the next implosion.“

In its heyday, the Sands offered top-name entertainment. Sinatra played his final public concerts there in November 1994 at The Copa Room. Others who graced the stage included Sammy Davis Jr., Cher, Liza Minnelli, Robin Williams, Eddie Murphy, Billy Crystal and Gloria Estefan.

It was the first Atlantic City casino to offer poker. But at 5,299 sqm of gambling space, the Sands had become the smallest of Atlantic City's 12 casinos before it closed last November. Its decor, while evoking the Sands in Las Vegas, was seen as dated here.

The Sands, like many other casinos here, lost gamblers and revenue to newer, larger, flashier competitors, particularly after 2003 when the Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa opened and redefined customers' expectations of what the casino experience should be like in New Jersey. By 1998, the Sands had already filed for bankruptcy, and two years later financier Carl Icahn took control of it.

He sold it to Pinnacle last year for USD 250 million, and the new owners quickly made plans to wipe it off the map. The new complex will not use the Sands name. The new casino is to be built on the 18-acre site on the Boardwalk and will have 2,000 hotel rooms and 1,114 sqm of gambling space, along with convention and meeting room space, high-end retail shops and a

large concert hall.

„It'll be a spectacular property,“ Lee promised, refusing to go into detail. „We're studying the best of the top hotels in Las Vegas and around the world, and there will be some new things that are not done anywhere else.“ The company expects to break ground next year.