THE TRADITION OF INVENTION
Conceiving Las Vegas

William A. Douglass
University of Nevada-Reno, USA
Pauliina Raento
University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract: Praised as the architectural icon of the contemporary world and the emblem of postmodernism, yet damned by its critics as the quintessence of poor taste, Las Vegas is one of the world’s premier destinations. Nevertheless, urban and tourism studies alike struggle to produce a comprehensive analysis of the Las Vegas phenomenon, while frequently under-scoring its inauthenticity and artificiality. This article discusses the history and the mindset that contributed to the touristic triumph of a most improbable candidate. Emphasis is upon the gambling mecca’s tradition of invention as opposed to its invention of tradition. The city’s critical massing of simulacra constitutes its own authentic reality. In the world of contemporary tourism, Las Vegas has become more paradigmatic than parasitical. Keywords: Las Vegas, invention, simulacra, authenticity.

INTRODUCTION

Since World War II, Las Vegas, Nevada, has been the fastest growing city in the fastest growing state in the United States. In the words of Sally Denton and Roger Morris 2001.

There is no place like it. It is literally a beacon of civilization. Peering at their cloud-speckled blue and blood-rust planet, astronauts make out the lights of Las Vegas before anything else, a first sign of life on earth (Sally Denton and Roger Morris 2001).
the subtitle of a recent study of its urban history, Las Vegas is now the “all-American city” (Gottdiener, Collins and Dickens 1999). Certainly its name recognition is planetary and, for better or worse, within the iconography of globalized consumer society, Las Vegas now has emblematic aura (Valhalla? Sodom and Gomorrah?). Given all the hype about and by Las Vegas, the fact that it is but a recent (20th century) creation, as well as the quintessential “invention” within an invented American West (McMurtry 2000), is easily lost in the shuffle.

Curiously, in analyzing this most exceptional of American urban places, there is tendency among urban historians (Moehring 1989) and urban critics (Davis 1999–2000; Gottdiener, Collins and Dickens 1999) alike to deny, or at least downplay, the city’s exceptionalism. Rather, in this literature Las Vegas is treated as but one of many sunbelt southwestern American communities (grouped together with similar urban places such as Phoenix, Albuquerque and El Paso) (Moehring 1989:13) or the culmination of southern Californian poor taste and environmental degradation (Davis 1999–2000). While a credible argument can be made for both of these interpretations, they are neither mutually exclusive nor comprehensive even when taken together. It is the purpose of this article to consider another aspect (indeed but one of many) of this most exceptional of urban places, the way in which the city is configured by a tradition of invention rather than the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992).

To the extent that Las Vegas differs from other sunbelt cities, statement of the obvious would underscore its legalized gambling. This is an industry upon which Nevada had a North-American monopoly from 1931 until 1978, when New Jersey first opened its own casinos (Dombrink and Thompson 1990). Arguably, by that time Las Vegas was to the wagering world what Mecca is to the Islamic one. Such descriptive fact, however, fails to account for the city’s spectacular success even within its particular universe. When gambling was legalized within Nevada, Reno to the north was a more mature community and enjoyed greater intrinsic attraction and accessibility (Douglass and Douglass 1996; Smith 1961).

Las Vegas was founded in 1905 as a way station railroad town at the mid-point of a new branch railroad operating between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles. By the 1910 census, it had 945 residents. Of its 495 males 18 years of age or older, 200, (40%) worked directly for the railroad and a like number provided services to the railroader population. By 1920, the town had grown to 2,304 persons of whom 1,298 were males 18 years and over. Of these, 696, (54%) worked directly for the railroad (calculated from the original handwritten census forms of the US Census Bureau in 1910 and 1920). Las Vegas remained a consummate company town for the next two decades, its growth further stimulated by emergence as the transshipping center provisioning the mining camps in the Bullfrog and Goldfield districts to the north.

As the rest of the nation entered the Great Depression, southern Nevada experienced the beginnings of what would become an economic boom driven by federal projects. Between 1931 and 1935, the
building of Boulder (later Hoover) Dam brought 5,000 construction jobs to the area. While the workers were housed mainly in the government town of Boulder City, adjacent to the dam site, Las Vegas was its supply hub.

By 1940, the town’s population stood at 10,389 persons (US Bureau of the Census 1943:756) and it was poised to receive another infusion of federal dollars. World War II triggered construction of the Basic Magnesium plant a few miles from Las Vegas, which, between 1942 and 1944, brought thousands of new workers to the area and then required a substantial permanent workforce to operate (Moehring 1989:37). The Army established a gunnery school to the north that, in 1949, became Nellis Air Force Base, a part of which evolved into the Nevada Test Site (for nuclear devices) in 1951. By 1950, then, through a combination of recreational and defense spending, Las Vegas had matured well beyond its genesis as a railroad company town. In that year’s census, Clark County had 48,289 residents of whom 24,624 lived in Las Vegas (compared to Reno’s 32,497 inhabitants and Washoe County’s 50,205) (US Bureau of the Census 1952:28–11).

By mid-century the south was not quite the biggest frog in Nevada’s pond, but the contest was clearly joined. Las Vegas was poised to become not only the emblematic urban place within the state, over the next half century it would emerge as an urban laboratory for the nation and the world. The extent that this was due in large measure to a unique zeitgeist is the subject of this paper.

CONFIGURING LAS VEGAS

Almost immediately after its founding, in 1905, the town had its own district of “boisterous clubs [that] played host to thousands of railroad passengers on train layovers” (Moehring 1989:11). The libertine ambiance was further exacerbated by the transitory-male character of the population. In the 1910 census of neonatal Clark County’s 3,321 residents, there were 2,078 males and but 1,243 females (US Bureau of the Census 1913:89). In Las Vegas itself, of the 743 persons 18 years of age and older, 495 (67%) were males. Of this male cohort, 308 (62%) were single, widowed, divorced, or unaccompanied married men, the large majority of whom were boarders. Indeed, such gender imbalance was characteristic of the first several decades of Nevada history. The disproportionate numbers of relatively young single males meant that in Nevada communities there was a proclivity for “saloon, casino, and bordello” (Roske 1990:29). The demographic reality “lent to Nevada’s values certain features that would have been less prominent in a more balanced, family-oriented population” (Edwards 1990:19). Adding to this gender bias, in Las Vegas per se were the overnight stays of the steady passage of male railroad crews. Hence, there was considerable custom for the town’s red-light establishments and gambling operations.

In 1909, Nevada followed the rest of the nation in outlawing gambling. Given the state’s frontier and rugged-individualist mentality, however, the activity was driven more to the backroom than to oblivion,
and continued to operate more or less openly (Raymond 1992:199). Moehring notes that during Prohibition Las Vegas speakeasies were masquerading as private clubs, presumably proffering betting opportunities along with booze while lending to the downtown a “wide-open atmosphere” (1989:11).

With its lack of industry, marginal (high desert) agriculture, depleted mines, and miniscule population, arguably Nevada faced the Great Depression as the intrinsically poorest state in the union. Consequently, in 1931, a desperate Nevada State Legislature liberalized its divorce laws and legalized gambling. Actually, it was the former that was designed to attract tourism. The law required a six-week period of residency and was thus intended to force the plaintiff (invariably the wife) to live (and spend) in the state before filing for divorce. The rationality behind the gambling measure was to tax an existing local reality. The two controversial initiatives made Nevada the national pariah (Raymond 1992:196); with its new “buccaneer economy” (Shepperson and Harvey 1989:172), Nevada was now America’s “maverick” state (Davies 1999).

Legislation of gambling coincided with the commencement of significant federal projects in southern Nevada. Accordingly, “the dam builders, soldiers, and defense workers brought to town by Uncle Sam patronized the city’s fledgling casinos laying the foundation for Las Vegas’s resort industry” (Moehring 1989:13). By the mid-30s, Boulder Dam had become its own “must-see” attraction, a technological “world wonder” that brought hundreds of thousands of tourists to the area (Moehring 1989:18).

Despite the ready availability of such local and tourist custom, Las Vegas’s city fathers were slow to embrace gambling (issuing but six licenses in 1931). Throughout the 1930s, they attempted to restrict the activity to certain areas and largely limited approvals to slot machines rather than full-blown casino games (Moehring 1989:20–21). However, the unique opportunity presented by legalized gambling and proximity to Los Angeles did not go unperceived in southern California. The Cornero brothers, ex-bootleggers from Los Angeles, constructed The Meadows casino on the highway between Las Vegas and Boulder, which subsequently closed after completion of the dam. By 1938, Los Angeles had a reforming mayor and the illicit operators either launched floating casinos on ships off the California coast or relocated to Las Vegas (and Reno as well). When state and federal officials cracked down on the shipboard operations, between 1939 and 1942, there was another migration of southern California gamblers to Nevada (Findlay 1986:122–123).

Guy McAfee, former head of Los Angeles’s vice squad, but also the overlord of the city’s illicit gambling dens, became particularly influential in Las Vegas. He purchased a casino, the Pair-O-Dice (a gambler’s play with the unincorporated area’s name—Paradise) outside the city limits and on the Los Angeles highway. He renamed the property the 91 Club (after the road’s numbering) and coincided its reopening with Ria Gable’s divorce from Clark, thereby demonstrating a sophisticated promotional capacity to ride the shirtdail of a national
media event. It was McAfee who ironically christened the forlorn patch of desert “The Strip,” after the famous Sunset one between Beverly Hills and Hollywood (Moehring 1989:42).

According to Findlay, “McAfee and his California colleagues not only compelled local competitors to expand their clubs and work to build up businesses, but also forged the initial link between Las Vegas and Hollywood...The migration of experienced operators from Los Angeles...made Las Vegas a full-fledged satellite of Southern California” (1986:124). In the early 40s, McAfee was joined on the Strip by the area’s first two resort complexes (the El Rancho and the Last Frontier) both of the stand-alone, full-service (including rooms, food, swimming pool, gambling and live entertainment) hotel-casino variety. However, the real action remained concentrated in “Glitter Gulch,” as Downtown Las Vegas had come to be known. Moehring notes, “By 1945, Fremont Street was ablaze in neon with the Boulder, Pioneer, Frontier, Monte Carlo, El Cortez and Las Vegas clubs, supplemented by a variety of smaller enterprises” (1989:43).

It was at this juncture that the Strip and the Downtown began to diverge. The former became more equated with affluent recreational tourism, the “gaming” crowd, while the latter was identified with working-class, no-nonsense gambling for the hard-core visiting and local gambler alike, although in practice the clientele in both was essentially middle class (Findlay 1986:134).

Until the mid-century, immediate post-war period the gambling complex in Las Vegas was characterized by an American-West frontier theme with its twin pillars of mining and ranching. During this first wave of identity creation there was no small amount of irony in the invention of this particular tradition. The very founding of the town postdates by more than a decade Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous pronouncement, in 1893, that the frontier phase of American history was over (Jackson 1920:37–38). As noted, Las Vegas began as a railroad center and remained so for its first quarter century. Indeed, for excellent reason the region remained largely unpopulated into the 20th century. The area is one of North America’s most desiccated (4.6 inches of moisture annually), with summer temperatures surpassing 115°F. In 1855, Utah’s Mormons sent out a party charged with establishing a ranch and mission on the limited spring-fed meadows of Las Vegas Valley, but the effort was abandoned by 1857. Throughout the remainder of the century there were but two or three hardscrabble ranches there (McCracken 1997:13–18).

Thus, the 1910 census lists among the town’s 45 residents but five adult males (four cattlemen and a sheep rancher) in ranching per se. The population of Native Americans (Southern Paiutes), the cowboy’s foil, had been reduced to eight individuals, who, as an “ethnic” element were far outnumbered by the town’s 55 Mexicans, 17 Japanese, and 16 Blacks. The 41 miners and nine mining promoters were more a reflection of Las Vegas’s status as a transportational nerve center of a further-flung southern Nevada mining complex than actual local mining activity. So the town’s “Wild West” image was both for southern Californian consumption as well as its creation. It was a horse
of the distinctly hobby sort that Las Vegas rode for awhile, and it could only be ridden so far. Enter Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel.

*From Pink Flamingos to White Dolphins*

Legalized gambling in downtown Las Vegas (and subsequently the city’s outlying neighborhoods) remained and continues firmly rooted within the invented western-tradition mold (and generally consonant with development of the industry in Reno and the rest of Nevada). It is to the Strip that one must turn to appreciate both Las Vegas exceptionalism and capacity for self (re)invention.

As urban space and place the Strip is an absolutely unique configuration. The bounded epicenter of the standard city is some combination of geographic (shore, swale, promontory), demographic (human settlement), functional (the financial and/or distribution center of a hinterland), and conjunctural (the crossroads of distant communications and transportation networks) features. The Strip manifests none of the foregoing. Rather, it is currently a four-mile-long lineal tracing across the floor of the Nevada desert. While its connection with the incorporated city of Las Vegas is now seamless, it lacks both a center and a second parameter. In this regard, the Strip points indexically into the desert wasteland, its capacity for further expansion seemingly limitless.

Neither is there much organic unity among its components. Each of the signal mega-properties was designed to be a destination resort, a self-contained pleasuredome. Each property is its own volume, purveying its idiosyncratic themed narrative, standing alone on a bookendless shelf. Mandalay Bay, Luxor, and Ex-Calibur, all Mandalay Corporation properties, are linked together by an internal monorail, as are The Mirage and Treasure Island, both creations of Steve Wynn. Such linkage reflects corporate considerations (that is, the effort to keep restless custom within the same corporate structure). Tellingly, the two monorail systems are surreptitiously located at the “back-of-the-store” rather than apparent features of the Strip’s boulevardier atmosphere.

Nor is the individual Las Vegas property analogous to other human constructs. It is all entrance and no exit; each façade inviting the tourist through the looking glass and into a labyrinthine, timeless world of concentrated stimuli designed as much to be disorienting as pleasurable in a relentless campaign to extend the length of onsite visitation. The best recent manual on casino design (Friedman 2000) emphasizes a low-ceilinged, dimly-lit micro-niches’ approach to optimum gaming-area construction, arguing that people are likely to linger longer in such cozy, understated, obscure spaces than in more garish, harsh, open, and illumined ones. The suspension of time is effected by the time-honored conventional wisdom of foregoing both windows and clocks. A casino patron is never reminded that it is either 4 a.m. or 4 p.m. A further disorienting/relaxing component to the casino visit is the provision of complimentary alcohol to the player.

During its slightly more than half a century of existence, the Las
Vegas Strip has transcended the hyperbolic. Its accomplishments are clearly superlative. As of the end of the year 2000, the Strip had nine of the world’s ten largest hotels. Las Vegas boasted the largest hotel room inventory (124,270) of any city in the world. Nevertheless, it enjoyed 92.5% hotel room occupancy versus the 68% national average. Its 4,000,000 square feet of meeting space make Las Vegas the leading convention city in the world. In the same year, the city hosted nearly 37 million tourists, making it North America’s favored destination. If gaming revenues for the entire state of Nevada surpassed $1 billion for the first time in 1975, 25 years later they approximated $5 billion on the Strip alone.

Due largely to developments there, during the last half-century Nevada has gone from being the least populated to the 34th most populated of the 50 United States. It was not necessarily fated to be. Indeed, it was improbable. As McCracken notes, even today

Las Vegas has the honor of being one of the most geographically isolated major cities in the continental United States. Los Angeles lies more than 270 miles—a 4-hour car ride—to the southwest. Salt Lake City lies 420 miles to the north; Phoenix is 290 miles to the south. Even farther away is Reno, Nevada, 460 miles to the north. The nearest communities beyond the metropolitan complex, which are at least 40 miles away, include Indian Springs, Overton, and Pahrump (1997:1–2).

So this icon of global culture seems to levitate within its own incredible lightness of being: the sole product of its self referentiality.

It may be argued that the Strip led Las Vegas through two distinct metamorphoses between the late 40s and the present, best personified by the promoters Bugsy Siegel and Steve Wynn. During the interim, Nevada “gambling” as a whole evolved into “gaming,” as in a respectable business activity, characterized by creation of stringent state regulation in the wake of the Kefauver Commission hearings (1950) into mob ownership and influence in Las Vegas and the subsequent (late 60s) entry of corporate America into gaming spearheaded by Howard Hughes’s acquisition of six properties on the Strip.

In a single pithy passage of his insightful essay “Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can’t hear you! Too noisy) Las Vegas!!!” Tom Wolfe captures the essence of the city’s postwar reinvention of itself and its metamorphosis into a true gaming destination. While the city fathers were playing with an ordinance “that would have preserved the town with a kind of Colonial Williamsburg dinkiness in the motif of the Wild West” (with a façade requirement that would make all new buildings reminiscent of “the sort of place where piano players used to wear garters on their sleeves in Virginia City around 1880”), Bugsy erected his entirely different vision on the Strip,

Siegel put up a hotel-casino such as Las Vegas had never seen and called it the Flamingo—all Miami Modern, and the hell with piano players with garters and whatever that was all about. Everybody drove out Route 91 just to gape. Such shapes! Boomerang Modern supports, Palette Curvilinear bars, Hot Shoppe Cantilever roofs, and a scalloped swimming pool. Such Colors! All the new electrochemical pastels of
the Florida littoral: tangerine, broiling magenta, livid pink, incar- 
dine, fuchsia, demure, Congo ruby, methyl green, vividine, aquamar-
ine, phenosafranine, incandescent orange, scarlet-fever purple, cyanic 
blue, tessellated bronze, hospital-fruit-basket orange. And such signs!
Two cylinders rose at either end of the Flamingo—eight stories high
and covered from top to bottom with neon rings in the shape of
bubbles that fizzed all eight stories up into the desert sky all night
long like an illuminated whisky-soda tumbler filled to the brim with
pink champagne (1965:10–11).

The Flamingo ushered in tropical and desertified theming—the Tropi-
cana, the Sands, the Dunes, the Desert Inn, the Sahara, the Alad-
din—as well as continental chic as in the Riviera and Caesars Palace.
It is perhaps indicative that subsequently the Last Frontier would be
rechristened the New Frontier before becoming simply The Frontier, a
passage from past to present to future, as well as from the specific to
the generic. In a similar vein, Caesars Palace omitted the apostrophe
that would access a particular Caesar or (depending on placement)
several of them (Raento and Douglass 2001:13,18).

In short, Las Vegas was becoming far more national and even inter-
national in scope. Wolfe describes the outbreak of francophilia (or,
more precisely, “the French war”) in the mid 60s:

The Stardust bought and imported a version of the Lido de Paris spec-
tacular, and the sight of all those sequined giblets pouring around on
flamingo legs inflamed the tourists. The Tropicana fought back with
the Folies Bergère, the New Frontier installed “Paree Ooh La La,” the
Hacienda reached for the puppets “Les Poupées de Paris,” and the
Silver Slipper called in Lili St. Cyr, the stripper, which was going
French after a fashion. So the Dunes has bought up the third and last
of the great Paris girlie shows, the Casino de Paris (1965:17).

Bugsy Siegel conceived “the American Monte Carlo” (although a
Mafia hitman deprived him of seeing it), in which the emphasis was
distinctly American, as in lack of any of the “inevitable upper-class bag-
gage of the Riviera casinos…” with their European standards regarding
“Wrong Forks, Deficient Accents, Poor Tailoring, Gauche Displays,
Nouveau Richness, Cultural Aridity—concepts unknown in Las Vegas”
(Wolfe 1965:16). Wolfe was clearly fascinated with the place
(celebrating its proletarian avant guardism, pondering its Mafia heri-
tage, ogling its varied sexual attractions), but without losing sight of
its pathologies. His essay is a precursor to the most famous negatively
critical analyses of the city—Hunter Thompson’s classic Fear and Loath-

In 1968, a group of three instructors, nine graduate students in
architecture, two in planning, and two in graphics decided to organize
a “studio” or seminar at Yale University to study the Las Vegas cityscape,
regarding it to be “The Great Proletarian Cultural Locomotive.” The
description of the study began with the words,

Passing through Las Vegas is Route 91, the archetype of the commer-
cial strip, the phenomenon at its purest and most intense. We believe
a careful documentation and analysis of its physical form is as
important to architects and urbanists today as were the studies of med-

However, when the participants visited Las Vegas and expounded their view that the city, with all its architectural complexity and heterogeneity, was a 20\textsuperscript{th} century marvel,

Our ideas...were met with polite skepticism, and we gathered that the Beautification Committee would continue to recommend turning the Strip into a western Champs Elysées, obscuring the signs with trees and raising the humidity level with giant fountains, and that the local planning and zoning agencies would continue to persuade the gasoline stations to imitate the architecture of the casinos in the interest of architectural unity (Venturi et al 1972:xii).

Indeed, in 1996, the Las Vegas Strip beautification project planted, at a cost of $13 million, 76,000 palms, flowering bushes and ground covers.

The Venturi et al work, \textit{Learning from Las Vegas}, with its empowerment of popular culture and criticism of architecture for art’s sake, was, like Las Vegas itself, highly controversial. The notion that what was, for some, the most gauche expression of contemporary culture could somehow be the beacon (or is it a million pricks of neon?) illuminating the human species’ artistic future was nothing short of scandalous. But Frederic Jameson further legitimated the Venturi viewpoint by declaring \textit{Learning from Las Vegas} to be the canonical text of postmodernism (1984). For some, then, the city had evolved from invention to global paradigm even before the Strip had felt the Promethean hand of Steve Wynn!

If Bugsy Siegel’s \textit{pink} Flamingo provided one parameter of the middle era of Las Vegas gaming history, the opening in 1989 of Steve Wynn’s The Mirage (indeed not any mirage since the article is part of the name) provides the other. Both projects may be regarded as termination of one era and initiation of another. If the Flamingo ushered in the city’s proletarian phase, The Mirage ushered it out. Even the color symbolism seems appropriate, given Wynn’s fixation upon \textit{white} dolphins, tigers and lions.

Wynn’s project met with considerable disbelief. For the naysayers, Las Vegas seemed to have reached its full maturity, perhaps best epitomized by the incursion of respectable financial institutions into casino financing and that of well-known magnates such as Howard Hughes and Kirk Kerkorian (themselves personification of twin pillars of 20\textsuperscript{th} century American and global culture—Hollywood and aviation), along with publicly-traded companies, into casino investment. The Mafia-ownership phase was over and Las Vegas seemed to be at the top of its game.

Nevertheless, by definition, “maturity” is declining growth: the city’s tourist counts had flattened out and many believed that the city’s room inventory was overbuilt. The temptation to slash room rates and drive custom with cheap promotions ($4.99 buffets, for example) and giveaways was palpable. Still Steve Wynn was proposing to build a mega-property with more than 3,000 hotel rooms, virtually no convention space, and an estimated “nut” (in casino jargon the daily operating
expense) of $1 million. It was Steve Wynn’s genius to recognize the possibility of changing the destination’s image fundamentally to attract (really for the first time) the higher end of the tourism market, without, however, driving away Tom Wolfe’s meat-and-potatoes proles and silver-haired ladies pumping nickel slots with industrial zeal that supported Las Vegas in the first place. Wynn had basically covered all the bases on the new Strip, including his joint-venture of the Monte Carlo with blue-collar-oriented Circus-Circus, his own middle-class Treasure Island, his somewhat more upscale Mirage, and his sumptuous Bellagio. He even catered to the serious, high-stakes gambler with his opulent, yet no-nonsense, Golden Nugget downtown property (clearly a response to the success of the nearby Binion’s Horseshoe Casino).

The Mirage “gamble” was nothing short of seismic in its success and consequences. It literally reconfigured the Strip into a battery of mega-property emulators: the Excalibur, the Luxor, the MGM, the Monte Carlo, New York-New York, Treasure Island, Mandalay Bay, the Bellagio, Paris, the Venetian. “Competition” in Las Vegas came to mean to Wynn at any cost. Along the way, Las Vegas went from being a proletarian’s discount delight to one in which hotels like the Bellagio and the Venetian command $400 for a night’s stay and the admission to headliner entertainment is more than $100 per person.

It was during the 90s, then, that the Strip discovered its real capacity to reinvent itself almost at will. In 1993, Kirk Kerkorian opened his billion-dollar MGM property, the world’s largest resort hotel (5,005 rooms) to date, replete with activities for children. With so much new room capacity coming online simultaneously, it was consonant with the Strip’s flirtation with becoming a “family destination” as a strategy for growing the market. For a couple of years, Las Vegas properties vied to outdo one another with children’s arcades, rides, and other amenities. But when that failed to produce the desired bottom-line result, there was a collective shrug. The MGM and Luxor, neither of which had even celebrated its fifth birthday, undertook remodels costing in the quarter-of-a-billion dollar range—a more than ample budget to build the best hotel property in most of the world’s tourist venues, but small change in the new Las Vegas.

While Reno echoed the national trend for preservation of old buildings, and fretted for years over the fate of the Mapes Hotel, Las Vegas razed Bugsy Siegel’s digs at what had become the Flamingo Hilton in 1993, and imploded the Dunes in 1993, Landmark in 1995, Sands in 1996, Hacienda in 1996, and Aladdin in 1998 hotels. Rather than apologetic or remorseful, the implosions were festive, attended by thousands and filmed for posterity. If Las Vegas had once been retro- spective in inventing itself; its capacity for reinvention is entirely prospective.

The factology and chronology of the Strip’s bricks and mortar are but a part of the story. The transformation is profoundly conceptual as well. After the failed attempt to attract families, the lord of the lemmings configuring the city’s zeitgeist perceived that much of the world’s tourism is driven by the quest for good cuisine, shopping, and Culture (with a capital C). Not to worry. If, prior to the 90s, Las Vegas was
known more for its cheap buffets than pricey gourmet dining, today there is scarcely a noted name within the world’s culinary Who’s Who absent on the Strip. With lightning speed Las Vegas has emerged as a major gastronomic destination. Presently, four of the 17 five-star restaurants in the entire United States are on the Strip, and it is awash with future contenders. Similarly, virtually all of the world’s purveyors of luxury retail items, particularly clothing and jewelry, have outlets on the Strip. Caesar’s Forum, with its price of $1,300 per square foot for leased space, is the world’s greatest concentration of luxury retail outlets. In recent tourists’ surveys, shopping ranks first as the reason for visiting Las Vegas (gambling was third, behind entertainment).

When he constructed his Bellagio project, Steve Wynn decided to discriminate it from his emulators by featuring worldclass entertainment and art. Regarding the former, he built on his internal strength. Montreal’s Cirque du Soleil had developed the show “Mystere” for Wynn’s Treasure Island property, so he gave it full rein to conceive of another for the Bellagio. The spectacle “O,” which transpires in the air, on the land and in the water, defies simple categorization and is currently sold out for three months in advance.

Wynn then spent approximately $300 million assembling an art collection that included the original Picassos adorning the walls of the five-star restaurant of that name. Not to be outdone, the Bellagio’s prime competitor, Sheldon Adelman’s Venetian, recently inked a contract with New York’s Guggenheim museum and St. Petersburg’s Hermitage to jointly curate a revolving exhibit within the property. In the grand tradition of Las-Vegas one-upmanship, Adelman thereby countered Wynn’s move while both invoking, and then potentially eclipsing, the city of Bilbao’s internationally-famed Guggenheim museum. Whatever Vegas wants Vegas gets.

Not only has the Strip become capable of near instantaneous auto-genesis, it now hosts, simultaneously, multiple incarnations of itself, creating the illusion of something for everyone. Kiddielands coexist with bawdy sex, the street hawkers of the literature for the latter making instantaneous discrimination between the “dads” and the “Johns” in the passing crowd. The gamut of dining options runs from the Wolfgang Pucks, through the $4.95 buffets, to McDonalds. The Diors, Tif-fanies, and Armanis compete with an army of souvenir shops. Combat is simulated in the staged daily jousting of Arthurian knights (Ex-Calibur) and piratical sea battles (Treasure Island), and real in the periodic championship matches of what has become the world’s major venue for professional boxing.

The tourist in Las Vegas is now recruited (indeed practically conscripted) into the endless army of flaneurs traversing, consuming, and photographing the Strip’s sensory overload of which they are an integral component. Arguably, there is no better place on the planet for people watching; no greater display of polyglot, multicultural variation. In the process their common experience serves as a kind of gigantic blender producing a smoothie that oozes in two-directional fashion. The effect is altogether antithetical to the circularity and intimacy of the passeggiata or paseo around some Mediterranean or Latin
American town square. Rather, the Strip stroller moves linearly from one sight to the next in an unfolding journey of new discovery. The return to point of origin (one’s hotel) is more likely to be effected by taxicab than on foot.

There is another more subtle, if no less significant, way in which Las Vegas has reinvented itself while simultaneously raising the bar and blazing the trail for future global tourism. Reference is to its unique accommodation of scale. As the innkeepers of most of the world’s largest hotels, while delivering a product to 37 million guests, the Strip’s operators face unique challenges in the realm of customer service.

For the nostalgic, loyal, long-in-the-tooth clientele the new Vegas is found wanting. Nicolas Pileggi verbalizes their frustration in his bestselling novel *Casino*:

> Only twenty years ago, dealers knew your name. What you drank. What you played. How you played. You could walk right in to the tables and be checked in automatically. A bellman you knew took your suitcase upstairs, unpacked your bags, and filled the room with your favorite booze and ice buckets of fresh fruit. Your room would be waiting for you, instead of you waiting for it.

Today, checking into a Las Vegas hotel is more like checking into an airport. Even the high roller hospitality suites get stacked up while computers check your credit line against your American Express number for verification that you are who you claim to be (1995:347).

Finessed and forgotten by this lament is the harsher side of customer service in the immediate pre-Mirage days. By that time, Las Vegas was becoming synonymous with poor, indeed predatory, service in which everyone had his hand out and the quality of one’s experience equated directly to the size of the gratuity.

It has become commonplace to discuss Las Vegas in terms of “disneyfication”, reference being to the use of exotic historical, futuristic and geographic theming. While that is certainly apparent, it tells but a part of the story. Michael Eisner, CEO of the Disney Corporation, and Steve Wynn are close personal friends. Wynn did not need Eisner to show him the way to and through The Mirage, rather the required assistance regarded the logistics of how to deal with the mega-crowds generated by such a mega-property. Disney was the world leader in confronting the problem of delivering quality customer service to the masses. Nor was Wynn the sole student of the mouseketeers. When Kerkorian’s organization faced the challenge of hiring tens of thousands of employees for the world’s largest resort hotel, its personnel office literally created a yellow-brick road that the applicant traversed before being shown a video extolling disneyesque enthusiasm and concern for each individual customer. If you were too jaded to buy into the rather hokey pokey, or at least juvenile, scenario you were encouraged politely to leave.

Finally, Las Vegas has now achieved the capacity to be both self-sustaining and proliferating phenomena. In the decade between 1990 and 2000, the population of its metropolitan area grew by an astounding 83% and the conservative estimate is that the area receives 1,500
new residents weekly. Predominant within the mix are retirees attracted by the area’s climate and lifestyle, as well as job seekers. Arguably, among the ranks of the newcomers there is at least some element of self-selection favoring persons attracted by the gaming ambiance. Expansion of the Las Vegas gaming scene is currently driven in some significant sense by a capacity to generate its own substantial local custom. In recent years, one of the town’s greater success stories has been the proliferation of “neighborhood” casinos such as Sam’s Town and the Station Casino properties.

If Las Vegas itself is the stellar attraction within the world of gaming, it also plays a pivotal role in its expansion globally, but particularly in North America. Most of the major publicly-traded gaming companies are headquartered in Las Vegas. Regarding other gaming venues, such as Atlantic City or the Mississippi Delta, the vast majority of casino properties are either branch operations of Las-Vegas capital or staffed by Las-Vegas-trained management. It is difficult to conceive of a single (epi)center that plays a greater role within its particular industry.

CONCLUSION

Culture critics struggle with a seemingly larger-than-life Las Vegas reality. In his seminal study The Tourist (1976), MacCannell draws a distinction between the genuine tourist attraction and its spurious simulacrum. The former is the spontaneous conjuncture and epiphany of geographical, historical, and cultural circumstance, the latter the crass creation of a corporate capitalism that was late to realize the commercial implications of tourism and then remains but partly capable of co-opting it. Consequently,

Large companies own the airlines and major hotels and attempt to market entire countries as “destinations.” But with the exception of theme parks and Las Vegas, they have encountered difficulty in their efforts to manufacture and purchase important attractions and destinations (1976:197; Emphasis added).

Accordingly, “at Disneyland and other such places where the tourist is made to pay for what he sees, the sight always seems to be faked up and promoted,” unlike “the Mona Lisa or Independence Hall [which] are not for sale” (1976:157). Consequently, in what is arguably the canonical text in tourism studies, there is but a handful of references to the Disney properties and only three to Las Vegas (in contrast to the extensive treatment of Paris). As such, two of the world’s major tourist complexes are more dismissed than analyzed in The Tourist.

Confronted (overwhelmed?) by Las Vegas, normally emboldened critics such as Hughes and Eco seem uncharacteristically devoid of insight. When assigned by Time magazine to contemplate the new Las Vegas, art critic Hughes was incapable of perceiving anything of value. To wit, “in a city of such overripe simulacra, whose most characteristic museum is dedicated to the memory of Liberace, what room is there for the clean, piercing, complex presence of real works of art?” (1998:80). Even more ironically, in his essay “Travels in Hyperreality”
Eco actually excludes Las Vegas from his journey through the “Absolute Fake” because it is a “real” place that “though born as a place for gambling is gradually being transformed into a place of business, industry, conventions” (1986:40). In his defense, Eco was writing prior to construction of Wynn’s Mirage property and the Strip’s subsequent latest reinvention of itself.

An alternative critical genre emphasizes the virtuality of Las Vegas as a construct of the visual media. Indeed, it is herein that the city’s exceptionalism lies. Sorkin notes,

More than any place on earth, being in Las Vegas is the spatial equivalent of being in television. The neon saturate of the Strip vamps the photonic bombard of cathode rays on the home screen. Vegas is aglow. To move through it is to drift through a collusion of pixels, to be too close to the screen, to be surrounded by a blur of bright radiation (1994:49).

Nevertheless, the distortion of authenticity remains a key concern:

Welcome to Disneyland by Adam Smith.... The invention of the modern theme park lies not in its theming..., but in the pseudo-aleatory style with which it juxtaposes its thematic components.... The breakthrough is the intensification, the hyper-familiarization, the way in which a drift through this environment so elasticizes the idea of an “authentic” reality that both concepts are rendered almost totally meaningless (1994:46).

Juliet Flower MacCannell finds the essence of the strip to be filmic:

Las Vegas is intimately indebted to film—to its money, its history, its theory, and significantly, its technology. In Las Vegas, cinematic techniques flower in completely unpredicted and surprising ways.... Vegas calls the laws of form into question, in the same way that they were always already called into question by the medium of film (2001:48, 58).

However,

Although Vegas is born of the movies, it cannot itself be filmed. Vegas is technically our first post-cinematic city. Its resistance to representation makes it unique. Because it is so openly fake and “Hollywood”, it cannot be seen through. It “has to be seen” [Indeed, Las Vegas has become] More fully fake than any place on earth (2001:62).

The point that the critical obsession with authenticity (or the seemingly obvious lack thereof) when contemplating Las Vegas is not only a statement of the obvious; it is entirely beside the point. Las Vegas is no more nor less a human invention than Rome, Paris, or San Francisco. Nor are the latter devoid of simulacra; indeed they are replete with them. When a city imports and displays an attraction (say an Egyptian obelisk), erects a neoclassical public building, or constructs a tract of Tudor homes, it is scarcely celebrating local tradition or “authentic” cultural distinctiveness.

What does distinguish Las Vegas from Rome, Paris, or San Francisco, then, is not an invented tradition (as if there could be any other kind),
but rather its tradition of invention. That is, within less than a century, Las Vegas, despite its inhospitable location and improbable prospects, emerged as the major tourism destination anywhere with the power to influence, if not configure, a significant portion of future world tourism. Las Vegas, through its capacity to reinvent itself, if not spontaneously then nearly so, is the antithesis of tradition. In its present incarnation, it is not simply composed of simulacra (pace Hughes), it has critically amassed them into an unprecedented configuration. In the process, Las Vegas has become the sole, and hence authentic, representation of its unique self: a success that is both envied and now emulated in varying degrees by other aspiring (and established) destinations. In its signed critical massing of simulacra, Las Vegas is now, ironically, more paradigmatic than parasitical.

How this might (or should) be viewed will, of course, vary from one observer to another. The reverential, even celebratory tone of the Venturi et al clarion call to learn from Las Vegas stands in stark contrast to Sorkin’s latest take upon the city’s influence upon humankind’s future:

Of course, the paradigm is clear: Las Vegas is being Beverly Hills’d, in homage to that other crucial cultural site, with its shared ethos of gigantic rewards for trivial accomplishments. Vegas is the free-range version of Beverly Hills, where everything is grown incredibly large: 5,000-room hotels and gambling floors measured in football fields. As images of lifestyle become one of America’s biggest exports, cities from Kuala Lumpur to Moscow hurriedly embrace this flimsy, fickle imagery, throwing up a miasma of knocked-off cardboard, belle époque crap (1999:61).

In a Nevada spin on a popular expression “You pays your money and you takes your chance!”

Finally, when dealing with a tradition of invention, by definition, its future is largely unpredictable. In 2000 Steve Wynn, indisputably the city’s prime reinventor, stunned the corporate world by selling his empire to arch rival Kirk Kerkorian. Wynn then invested part of his considerable proceeds in the purchase of the Desert Inn, a property that he then demolished (with the media event of a spectacular implosion, of course) for his next project. In a recent appearance before Nevada gaming authorities, he refused to “turn over his cards” while declaring theming to be passé. Consequently, to a degree, Las Vegas is now in a state of suspended animation, or rather anticipation, awaiting the inkling of its next reincarnation. What remains apparent is that its tradition of invention lends pace to the city’s evolution that simply outstrips the capacity of both the consuming public and analysts to fully process.

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