

**LAS VEGAS TRANSFORMED PART I:
THE TRIUMPH OF THE SYNTHETIC CITY**



**Photo along Las Vegas Strip from Venturi, Scott-Brown, Izenour
Learning From Las Vegas**

The redevelopment of the Las Vegas Strip over the last two decades once again posits another model for the new American City. The last time that could be said was the 1960's, when Las Vegas was discovered by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown to be emblematic of newly evolving tendencies in urban development. Las Vegas wasn't the only place that celebrated the phenomenon of the evolving culture of the automobile, the commercial strip, pop entertainment, and the dreams of the suburban lifestyle. But no where else were their manifestations so overt, brash, exaggerated, and entertaining, where it all came together with such flair and confidence, as if we already knew where we were heading, and never had to look back.¹ Without apologies or embarrassment, the neon signs, casinos, wedding chapels, drive-ins and

entertainment extravaganzas, the sheer audacity of it all, were what the masses wanted to visit in its unadulterated state, not to be diluted.

As a caricature of someplace most of us never experienced, Las Vegas remained outside the mainstream of the real, everyday world to be taken too seriously. It was safe to visit, resistant to criticism, and held little threat to the places where we actually lived, and were still used as the proper models that planners were supposed to follow. Las Vegas could just be appreciated as a parody of a unique phenomenon, an aberration, removed from the “true” urbanism that continued to be based on the spatial and formal constructs of the historic city. Even with the serious attention generated by the seminal *Learning From Las Vegas*, published in 1972,² urban theorists were actually comforted, if not entertained by its strangeness, difference, and alienation from the European models that we believed would still shape the American city. *Learning From Las Vegas* had a lot of discourses offering competing points of view, most of us were not convinced, and the study of the city remained centered elsewhere.³ The threat, if not the reality, seemed very distant.

We now know that we were wrong. Once seen, how could the experience be cast aside and forgotten? It’s almost like those who came away from the great “White City” of 1893 with a sensibility, a *fervor* that initiated urban redevelopment throughout the United States as “The City Beautiful” crusade.⁴ It’s understandable: once you’ve experienced Las Vegas, with its overwhelming spectacle and imagery, who wants it to end when we get back home? And to be sure, the rampant commercialism, the images of popular culture, advertising, the extension and fragmentation of space promoted by the automobile that fueled the uniqueness of Las Vegas *don’t* end when you get home, and through new media and communication technologies, are manifested in virtually every city across America.

Las Vegas may be the only city whose identity is based almost solely on popular entertainment. But as other cities have lost population, and business and shopping exiting to the suburbs, it is the concept of urban entertainment— the museum, cultural center, sports stadium, convention center, and historic warehouse districts— that have become the justification and life blood for our remaining viable city centers. *Learning From Las Vegas* was actually prophetic, as it not

only legitimized the new manifestations of suburbanization and the decentralized city, but it suggested new sources for urbanism outside the traditional urban models of the time.

The last two decades has witnessed a new transformation of the Las Vegas Strip, every bit as startling and unique as the classic hotel/casino strip of the 1960's-70's. Starting with the construction of the Caesar's Palace Hotel complex, there has been built a new generation of mega-theme hotels, along with mass transit and entertainment extravaganzas that has changed the strip's character and form, and has generated new types of urban realms. Once again, it has been isolated and trivialized by the architectural press as an urban phenomenon unique to Las Vegas, with little discussion of its possible wider implications that will affect the evolution of the city.

It is suggested, however, that the "new" Las Vegas is as significant as the old one, and deserves a serious examination of recent architectural and urban manifestations. The recent hotels that have transformed the strip constitute another form of a "synthetic" city that has dissolved the line between the authentic and simulated experience, possessing qualities that support new forms of authenticity on its own terms.

Setting the Scene

The new identity of Las Vegas begins around 1990 with a series of new hotels that redefine the role and identity of the Las Vegas entertainment complex, taking on new scales, budgets, and programmatic and thematic complexities. The Excaliber was built by the Circus-Circus investors in 1990, with over 4,000 rooms at a cost of \$290 million, a vast, turreted complex with stone walls and tower "dungeons," a cartoon-like celebration of medieval pageantry. Across the way, the same developer builds the Luxor in 1993; a 350' pyramid of black-sheathed glazing enclosing 500 rooms, and expanded to 4,500 in 1997, making it at the time the second largest hotel in the world. The pyramid shoots out a beam of light (the most powerful ever manufactured) from its apex that is visible from 250 miles away, and identifiable by aircraft flying above. The interior is one of the world's largest enclosed atriums, precisely reflecting the form of the exterior

pyramid. The world's first incline elevators traveling along the sloped corners of the pyramid resolve the "impossible" problem of designing elevators within an open interior tetrahedral volume. In front is a replica of the great temple of Ramesses II from through which one enters the hotel, and inside is a display of the only replica of Harold Carter's discovery of the King Tut tomb outside of Egypt.



Hotel Luxor

Not to be outdone, Steven Wynn expands the Mirage Hotel through building "Treasure Island," a 3,000-room hotel qua nautical fantasy completed the same year as the Luxor. One enters across a bridge between a pirate ship and a British naval ship, which reenact a naval battle every 1½ hours, and has now been seen by 16 million people. The 3000 room Monte Carlo, modeled after the Place du Casino in Monte Carlo, is built in 1996. One year later, the hotel New York-New York, in pure hubris and audacity, if not size, raises the stakes again. A montage of New York's most famous buildings are packed together in a fabricated (although appropriate) state of congestion. Reduced versions of the Empire State, Chrysler, Woolworth, Seagrams, and City Hall jostle for space, in front of which is the Ferry Terminal and the Statue of Liberty. One arrives (over a street) by crossing the Brooklyn Bridge, and walks along snippets of SoHo and the Village before entering the hotel. Most astounding is the Coney Island "Cyclone," a working recreation of the famous roller coaster which threads its way in, out, and around the hotel complex, periodically coming into view. The interior is complete with hot dog

carts, delicatessens, and manhole covers within the floor from which emanate continuing wisps of steam.



Hotel New York

Only in the last two years come a series of the ultimate, mega-theme hotels: the Paris Las Vegas, the Venice, the Bellagio, and the Mandalay Bay. These hotels achieve new heights of replication, spectacle, and the blurring crossovers of place, event and culture. The difference is that they now seem to take themselves very seriously—the nature of the replication is to be as authentic as possible—a “true” copy, as it were, comparable to the very accurate “original reproductions” sold in museums, that get as close to the real thing as possible. The materials and details are exacting reproductions of both well-known and vernacular buildings and landscapes found in Europe and the South Pacific. The accuracy is so convincing that certain vistas are almost precisely like the perception that one would have in the duplicated local. Even patinas have been applied to make the new construction seem far older, and make the scene look and feel authentic.



Hotel Paris

The Hotel Paris recreates the famous monuments of the city, not as exaggerated pastiche, but as exact replicas that match the original in every way except for scale. The Eiffel Tower, over 500 feet in height, is a precise, $\frac{1}{2}$ size duplication, down to the trussed bracing and articulated rivets. It also functions much like the original, with an elevator taking visitors to the top for a view, in this case, of the strip. The project combines other well-known monuments, including the Hotel DeVille, Paris Opera, Arc de Triomphe, and the Louvre into a compressed arrangement, which sometimes forces extreme adjacencies and overlap, with the legs of the Eiffel Tower crashing through the Casino just in back of the Louvre façade. At the same time, operational aspects are “authentic” to a fault—the Boulangerie inside is an actual, working French Bakery of extremely high quality (probably better than its average Parisian counterpart!), and produces goods that supply both the hotel and other restaurants. The Brasserie, in terms of food, waiters, décor, outside café, *everything*, feels exactly right, and unapologetically opens itself right out onto the strip, without seeming to realize that it’s *there*, and not on a Parisian boulevard where it’s supposed to be.

The Hotel Venetian does much the same thing as the Paris, but with even higher ambitions, and raises the stakes once again. Opened in 1999, it is now the world’s largest hotel and convention complex, with 3,036 suites, an 85,000-sq. ft. ballroom, and a 500,000-sq. ft. shopping complex, built at a cost of 1.5 *billion* dollars. It’s advertisement, that it

“combines the romance of Venice with the luxury of Beverly Hills with the excitement of Las Vegas” makes it plain: that the real Venice doesn’t stand a chance against *this!*



Hotel Venetian

The exterior is a collage of the familiar picture postcard monuments, all packed together into fabricated vistas far more interesting and picturesque than their original counterparts. And once again, they are all there: the Doge’s Palace, St. Mark’s Campanile Tower, the Rialto Bridge, the Ca’D’Oro Palace, which aside from the Campanile’s actual proximity to the Doge’s Palace, are seen together for the first time. They are a little smaller than the original, but otherwise, they got the materials, colors, and details just right. And if it wasn’t possible to bring St. Mark’s Square into the composition (it just doesn’t work to put an enclosed space into an external façade), one could simply bring it inside, as the primary “event” along the shopping mall. The ceiling of the Square, and streets leading up to it are painted as an artificial sky that stays eternally sunny and blue, with fluffy clouds that are a tour-de-force of naturalism.

Tying everything together is a miniaturized “Grand Canal,” a water feature that extends from the outside lagoon through the interior mall, with actual, full-size gondolas (and of course singing gondoliers) that seem to be duplicates to those plying their trade in Venice. The gondola is a brilliant effect: an authentic product (not reproduction) actually brought over from Venice that is instantly recognizable, and makes the whole enterprise seem legitimate. What has become a theme

park-like tourist spectacle in the real Venice, is now transplanted into an *actual* theme park, thus making the displaced gondola, in contrast to its faked context, take on a newly acquired perception of authenticity.

If the Las Vegas hotel type used to be planned around the Casino, that no longer holds true at the Venetian. One can visit the shopping mall without ever setting foot in a casino, and one suspects that given the importance of the Convention Center, gambling itself, the *raison d'être* of pre-1990 Las Vegas, might even have been omitted without threatening the project's success. It's perfectly reasonable to visit Las Vegas and have no interest in gambling, and as we know, gambling can now be found in many other places, and is not so unique to Las Vegas anymore. What are still special, and unparalleled in this city, are the uniqueness, quality and power of the spectacle, the themed replications, which now becomes the reason to pick one hotel over another.

Clearly in competition during the same period of construction was the construction of the \$1.6 billion Bellagio, another 3,000 plus room hotel which was conceived as an alternative to "The Paris" just across the strip. But how do you compete with the Eiffel Tower and the familiar, iconic images of Paris and Venice, given the murky imagery of an obscure Italian Lake village that most visitors have never heard of, or seen pictures, let alone actually visited. In fact, it competes, or even surpasses its competition through imposing a concept that is even more audacious than anything that came before. The idea put simply is: propose a lake town *in a desert* (typically reaching 110 degrees in the summer), that by its nature lacks water, except through the most extraordinary efforts of artificial, man-made intervention. It's one thing to reproduce a built landmark, or even the Eiffel Tower---but to defy nature itself by building a man-made *lake* when even turning on a faucet is an achievement, is little less than to attempt a miracle.

And so it was done. An 11-acre lake was created, which was the centerpiece of a surrounding hill town village, culminating in the hotel tower. Once again, the spaces, details and materials are magnificent, and achieved with utmost accuracy. A glass-roofed arcade leads from the hotel to a superbly crafted and proportioned conservatory filled with exotic plants and flowers. The light-filled arcade continues on, linking the conservatory to the casino, and then to a formal commercial "street" of elegant shops that finally culminates at the sidewalk along

the Strip. The other side of the perfectly realized street with picturesquely composed storefronts presents a completely different scene, a superimposed stage set that has little to do with anything experienced from the interior.. The backs of the stores and restaurants are articulated into a variety of 2-3 story, small village-scaled units of varying materials, window styles and colors, as if built over time by a variety of architects. The buildings do tend to remind one of a prototypical hill-town texture, but here done so perfectly, a composite of vistas, juxtapositions and picturesque qualities that are brought together from the city of Bellagio, or any number of the other lake towns as well. Precise accuracy doesn't count for much here, since almost nobody knows what the place really looks like! While it may not be true, it is in fact modeled on what is true and most importantly, it does "seem" to be true.

The real triumph is the presence of an actual Art Museum (now closed), filled with not reproductions, but actual art masterpieces, including works by Monet, Renior, Picasso, Van Gogh, Matisse, and other seminal artists. The collection was assembled together specifically for the hotel's museum at a cost of over \$300 million, and selected by Ted Pillsbury, formerly Director of the renown Kimbell Museum. The collection is of significant cultural value, and has in fact become a major tourist attraction among the sights throughout the strip. Set in the city of the fantastic, art such as this must surely be a reproduction—albeit a very accurate, supremely skillful reproduction. But in a most knowing kind of reversal, it turns out to be *real*. As much of a reversal as when we are outside a museum and see work of the Masters that was so skillfully executed that we believe it could be real, and certainly feels real, although we know it is actually false. And so the authentic masterpieces become joined with the reproduction of transplanted images, high culture (art) becomes joined with low culture (gambling), and in fact, it all seems to live very well together indeed.⁵

The City as Spectacle

A new form of "public" space has now activated the Strip: the space of spectacle. Over the last two decades, the major new hotels have constructed a series of extravagant productions as a series of

staged entertainments that are viewed by the pedestrian as one circulates between hotels. These free events, scheduled every half-hour or so, and only about a fifteen minute walk from one end to the other, have become well known, and at the appointed time, hundreds of tourists are watching from preferred vantage points. When one event is over, one moves on to another, forming a continuous procession of pedestrians fueled on by the promise of experiencing something new and ever more fantastic and dazzling, not unlike moving through an unfolding amusement park.

First one starts at the Treasure Island Hotel to the north, where one encounters a sea battle in an artificial lagoon between a fabricated pirate ship and British frigate. Actors and stunt men perform an amazing piece of narrated, heart pounding action, complete with thundering cannon fire, explosions (which actually throw off heat that can be felt within the crowd), and sailors falling into the water. Finally, the British frigate actually *sinks* into the lagoon (mechanically, of course—if one waits a while, it will be seen rising up once again), and the show come to an end. One then moves on to the Mirage, where one encounters another lagoon within a tropical landscape, featuring a volcano which “erupts” every ½ hour. The simulation is mostly made up of a light and sound show, but one is taken by surprise when “lava” flowing into the lagoon literally sets the water on fire (presumably through gas jets, an otherworldly sight whose glow is again viscerally felt, as well as seen.)

When you arrive to the Hotel Bellagio, the water scene culminates in a literal made-made lake in front of the hotel tower. In the center are over 1,000 fountains that shoot water up to 240 feet in the air, a complex array of pulsating sprays, streams, and spritzes controlled by computer, and highlighted by a changing program of colored light. Nothing of the kind can be found in Lake Como, or can be matched by even the most magnificent of Rome’s fountains.⁷ Across the way, the campanile of the Eiffel Tower provides not only an elevated viewing platform that allows one to take in the whole scene from above, but contributes its own sense of animation and spectacle through the exposed mechanics of the moving elevators, ablaze in light.

Farther down the Strip, the programmed spectacles continue, but a bit more modestly, with correspondingly smaller crowds and less

pedestrian traffic. The medieval-themed Excaliber provides a jousting tournament, with knights on horseback reenacting ancient rituals. The Hotel New York New York provides “fireboats” in New York harbor (water again!) shooting changing streams of water adjacent to a scaled reproduction of the Statue of Liberty while at the same time incrementally punctuated by the passing rumble of the Coney Island roller coaster. The MGM Grand presents giant screen movie clips to the passing audience, now becoming familiar as giant screen presentations are seen in cities everywhere. The series of spectacles and flow of pedestrians quietly come to an end at the Luxor, where the pyramid lies black and inert. But even here the tourist is surprised by the laser shows that suddenly emanate from the apex, beautiful in itself, but far too abstract for the city that thrives on the staged presentation of enduring, familiar narratives.

In some ways, this pedestrian scene on the Strip is almost as intense as anything that one might find in a traditional urban street/plaza experience, but with some important differences:

- If the traditional street is made active by pedestrians who need little in the way of program to participate in the public realm, the urban spectacle completely depends on the programmed event to bring in a crowd. If there's no event, the people are gone.

- If the traditional street defines an identity through the quality of its space and physical surroundings, the Strip completely depends on the staged event, synthetic lighting and advertising to define its identity.

If the electricity goes off, it all becomes simply “nothing.”

- If the traditional street is physically entered and experienced by the pedestrian, the events on the strip are set off on some distinctly staged space that can not be populated. The experience is removed, or set back, as occurs in theater.

- If the traditional street presents an unpredictable array of behavior and experience; the spectacles of the strip are staged, precisely recurring events. The experience quickly become predictable—what was seen one month will be seen again in its exact reincarnation (unless intentionally re-programmed).

- If the traditional street is essentially public space to serve the public interest, the events along the strip are opened to the public,

but actually take place on privately owned property, and are controlled and programmed by a particular owner based on private interests.

Ingredients of the Real-Not Real

The elaborate presentation, and let's say, conviction of the theme hotels in terms of the quality of their reproductions present a dilemma in terms of defining the nature of the copy, replication, and the fundamental notion of authenticity. It no longer suffices, however obvious, to explain that the city of Venice is "real," while the Hotel Venice is not, that the city of Paris is real, and the Hotel Paris is not, and so forth down the line of thematic inspirations. And it is equally difficult to conclude that one (the authentic) is good, and the other (the replication) is "bad," or that one is even clearly better than the other. It is insufficient to isolate the hotels into their own peculiar category, and thus "acceptable of their kind," but not at all able to hold their own when argued, or placed against the external standards of the real thing.⁸ The new hotels in fact bring into focus a series of issues that are particularly relevant in an age when the powers of reproduction through technology and media have long-ago overpowered the unquestioned supremacy of the authentic.⁹ These projects force an examination of the making of place, the dislocation of a specific culture from the artifacts of a generic culture, and the shifting condition of identity, relative to the problem of architecture, and the evolution of the city.

It would be easier to dismiss the hotels if the results were truly shoddy, garish, inaccurate, cheap caricatures of the original, like the flattened arches pasted on facades of "post-modern" buildings in the 1980's. In these hotels, we are presented with construction details, materials and overall quality that are every bit as good as the sources, and in some cases, even better. Material might still be hung on a steel-framed backing, but what's in front seems like the real thing, right down to the aged patina. It's all so precise—if the Eiffel Tower or other monuments aren't the true size, they are *exactly* one-half the height as intended, and otherwise pretty much get it right in terms of the details. The copies of the facades of the Ca D'Oro Palace and the Doges palace in Venice are so accurate that particular cropped views look almost

identity to the original sources. The reproductions are perfect! And in some cases, actual elements are variably mixed into the replicated environment, such as the gondolas that are produced in Venice, the original paintings by well-known artists (in the Bellagio Museum), or the use of the same materials as are used in the original source, and other examples of the authentic, further clouding the authority of the real to be defined, and overpower the copy.

The other ambiguity in deciphering the degree that the reference is authentic and not a fabrication, is that in some cases, the reference is generic, being loosely based on an actual local, but is not connected to a specific artifact, or place. In the Hotel Bellagio we are presented with an indigenous townscape of buildings that seem right, and could be precisely taken from a part of the Italian city of Bellagio. But if you tried to find them there, or from any other lake town in Italy, you couldn't. The materials and details, even the overall composition of roofs, everything is based on the original source, but a source that has become generalized and fuzzy, an Italian townscape of memory, or the imagination, rather than a particular urban scene. It's authentic, but also a fabrication at the same time. The Excaliber Hotel takes it one step further, where the source is based on castles represented in literature that never actually existed, such as the "Legend of Sir Lancelot and the Knights of the Round Table." But the architecture seems to be a true, "accurate" representation of the literary source, as if the image presented in the book was brought to life, with no fudging of the scale, details or other liberties allowed.

What gives the replications of the more identifiable theme hotels even more strength, perhaps not only enough to justify attempting the simulation, but even overpower the original is the technique of cropping (very similar to film), or leaving out the extraneous, and just keeping in "the best parts." In the cities of Venice, Paris or New York, the monuments and events of interest as "figures" (dominant, foreground images) are seen in a larger field of background fabric, as a residual "ground" from which the figures are read against. For instance, the Arc de Triomphe is seen against the surrounding frame of the place Etoile, or, the unified massing of Rockefeller Center forms a coherent composition in the midst of differentiated, surrounding development. In many cases, the interesting monuments are not only not within one's

field of vision, but are of considerable distance from one another. Reality has to contend with all of the space (and time) of less interest in-between, which are a part of the evolution and experience of the local.

Las Vegas doesn't have to do that, and jump-cuts, or crops of all the residual ground conditions, discarding everything of less interest in favor of what we all came to see. All the dull stuff, the extraneous, the inappropriate is omitted. There is no background—it's all foreground! The well-known monuments are placed cheek to jowl, right next to one another, sometimes close to their actual relationship as prescribed by reality (the Tower of San Marco next to the Doges Palace, or the Empire State near the Chrysler Building). More often, they are placed in wild juxtapositions with one another, presenting views of events that were never meant to be associated together. Some provide new interest, such as the Eiffel Tower read against the backdrop of the Louvre; others are incredulously absurd, as the Statue of Liberty juxtaposed against the Empire State Building, leading to the Brooklyn Bridge. But there is so much to present—and so little room (or site) to place it all! The demand is to make them come closer together, compress, compress, until the objects are completely juxtaposed and intertwined. Thus, we end up with the giant legs of Eiffel Tower crashing through the roof of the Casino (the Louvre), forming dramatic interior vistas and contrasts; or, the most dramatic relationship of the Cyclone roller coaster which swirls around the exterior of the New York New York skyline, sometimes cleaving through the roof to bring the ride inside, surprising both the rider and the hotel guest.

There are actually precedents for this wild scenographic editing, or reinvention of the city. The artist Canaletto (1697-1768) painted scenes of Venice where actual and imaginary scenes are combined into an improved version of the city, which was actually intended to be a visual “souvenir” of the highlights of what was seen by the visitor. This work served to inspire the fantasies of the 18th century artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778), where scenes of Rome are infused with well-known monuments mixed with those that are improved compositional fabrications, placed together in a fantastic combination of fragments.¹⁰ For instance, in an etching by Piranesi from the *Opere Varie*, several columns from what could be the ruin of

the Temple of the Dioscuri is shown impossibly combined with the Pantheon in the background, all of which is adjacent to a waterfront (the port of Ostia?) located some 30 miles away! Piranesi presents a form of “analogous” city, a completely subjective invention on the part of the artist.¹¹ The analogous city presents a reality where discontinuities, fabricated additions, physical transformations and other ruptures are carried out. The presentation of buildings and other cultural artifacts are routinely altered to enlarge the understanding of the city’s history and meaning.¹²

Today, such liberties are typically taken in the movies and advertising, where the techniques of spatial and temporal compression are completely familiar and accepted a matter of course. And given the rise of popular culture over the last half-century and recent developments in communications and the web, such a state of compression and temporal/spatial fragmentation will not be a shock to the visitor to Las Vegas. As is commonly experienced in any good theme park that packs in a maximum quantity of stimuli per minute, it will not seem unusual to be able to take in the highlights of a “city” in a couple of hours, and the features of other locals from around the world in only a few days. We know it isn’t real, it’s not actually Venice, or Paris, but as in film, it can be seen as a perfectly good substitution, if the actual place isn’t available, or more critically, reality doesn’t fulfill expectations. Anyway, one didn’t come to Las Vegas to find reality—we come to see something better.

It demands that we all become observers, watchers, gazers, taking in a continuous presentation of new scenes, with what came before offering little preparation for what is about to come next. We become voyeurs, gazing on something outside our frame of reference, or certainly none of our business, such as individuals compulsively putting money in the slots, an exultant winner, watching those eating too much, drinking too much, spending too much, or talking too loud. In the city of appearances, one dresses and acts to be seen, evaluated, and contribute, at least in some small way to the presentation. It is also the city of surveillance, where we know we are also being seen, and are more often not aware of being observed by those paid to watch the casino floor, who in turn are being watched by their superiors to maintain maximum control. The Hotel Venice has over 1,000 cameras

to watch for theft, cheaters, and anything else that could affect the proper flow of operations. We become part of a field of crossing vectors of views, further shifting the experience of reality into directed observations articulated from the flow of natural events.

Perhaps the question isn't substitution, or even a measured equivalence to reality. It is simply a presentation of the world that sets its own standards (which are very high) and norms, and in its way, *is* real, if that is what becomes the prevalent standard by which we experience the world. While that world might seem to be very far from everyday experience, the fact is that the edge between the exaggeration of the framed fantasy and the everyday world as we know it has become more and more blurred.¹³ Through the bombardment of media in film, video and print, we are constantly presented with an altered reality, which no longer can be judged against what we know as reality, because the real has been contaminated, and re-framed by technology.¹⁴ This is a new form of "hyper" reality, that intensifies, re-frames and improves the world as we know it, and sets its own terms. Those would include the following:

1. It is perfectly acceptable to "edit" space and time, maximize the good stuff, and leave out the extraneous.
2. Any presentation of an altered reality can be made up of a mix of "real" things (those that are unaltered unframed and contextualized), and "artificial" things (those that are altered, cropped, and re-contextualized). One is not better, more valid, preferential, or more believable than the other.
3. The mix of the real and artificial has become fuzzy and ambiguous; clear lines of separation can no longer be drawn. A new hybrid, the formation of the "real-not real" has become a prevalent condition of the modern world.
4. Any existing artifact, or place that we know is possible to be chosen, or "appropriated" and presented once again in a precise replication of itself.¹⁵ The appropriation of a context typically forces it to be separated from its original meaning, and dislocated relative to its original context.
5. The act of appropriation now results in a dislocation of culture and history from the specificity of place and artifact.

Appropriation

Appropriation is an especially interesting problem in facing the question of representation and authenticity. The act of choosing and re-representing any particular monument or context removes our ability to ever be able to incorporate it as a part of our everyday experience. It forever remains framed, separated out from the world, and placed in a position to be examined and evaluated as something outside, or, the experience of the “other.” This selected portrait, almost as in a staged performance, now becomes an object of contemplation, open to interpretation. It can be judged as entertaining, disappointing, highly accurate, an overstatement, subtle, a parody, caricature, magical, or any number of other terms that we tend not to apply to everyday life, or even when one visits the original context. The actual, original context as source material is what it is, and can never be much more. But an appropriated context always presents ulterior information, sometimes didactic, sometimes entertaining, but always more, and typically, larger than life.

Technology (along with talent, and financial commitment) is a critical component in any act of appropriation. As with photography, along with new techniques of replication, reenactment and other special effects applied to film, we now expect to get it right, down to the minute detail. With a virtually exact replication we can compare the copy to the original, and the differences aren't all that clear. The superb copy can take on the specific identity and bears likeness to the original, allowing it to become a stand-in, if not take its place, and allude back to the actual content found back at the source. It becomes another form of the original, just as the photograph is another form of the experienced, actual scene, and furnishes evidence of objective truth. “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed.”¹⁶ A shoddy, cheap, inexact copy just won't do, as it becomes only a fiction, or parody, that bears some sense of resemblance as approximation, but can never be directly aligned to the original source. As soon as any comparison is attempted, one can only conclude that the original is so much better, and the copy is relegated to insignificance.

The theme hotels in Las Vegas strive for the highest standards of replication, and spend enormous amounts of money for the

appropriation to be initiated, and believed. The specific examples and places chosen must be the best, most representative, or known, so that what must be an abridged version of a larger scene will best serve to summarize the image and content of a particular city, and capture the essence of the place. The designers of the experience choose the monuments lodged in our collective memory (just enough, not too many) and have them placed and compressed to allow the maximum information to be captured in the single cropped image for maximum effect. This is brilliantly conceived in the Hotel New York-New York, where we capture not only the form of the great skyscrapers (the Empire State, Chrysler, and Seagrams) but also a mix of more anonymous modern high-rise towers, to create the effect of an actual skyline. For the Hotel Venice, the Rialto Bridge leads to the Doges Palace, flanked by the San Marco Tower, with the Ca D'oro at the other end, all situated beyond the requisite foreground of water simulating the Grand Canal.

What is left out in any appropriation is the associated history and culture connected to the actual source of the replication. Any sense of a past disappears, and we are only left with an ongoing present. The culture that produced the original is completely removed, leaving an empty vessel, which can be taken over by any culture, or in a tourist destination, a mix of all (global) cultures. The appropriation can land anywhere, with no conceptual, stylistic, material or typological ties to the geographic local required. It is generally accepted that any work of art can be transplanted, and shown anywhere. Similarly, most any building form, as a particular "type" can be repeated and serve other functions than originally intended.¹⁷ In fact, the arbitrary relationship between artifact and place sometimes works even better if there's a concerted lack of logic, or inappropriateness between the appropriation and its adapted context, such as an Italian lake town (the Hotel Bellagio), or the Venice canals placed in a desert. In other cases, the degree of fit is accidental, such as the Hotel Luxor conceived as a pyramid being located in a flat desert, the same as its source in Giza. Local contextual relationship is a non-issue for both, with the former built across the Hotel Paris, and the latter built adjacent to the medieval Excaliber fantasy. They could have been switched, or built next to one

another, it doesn't matter. The land was simply made available at the time the concept was synthesized, and it happened that way.

The “emptying” of the architectural form of its content and earlier associated meanings, leaving only the image of the external shell, albeit accurately rendered, would seem to suggest a critical indictment against the use of appropriation. But it can be argued that even the original sources have been long ago been appropriated by media, popularized and reduced to commodities, snapshots of tourist destinations, and now appreciated for their iconic representation of a place rather than their intrinsic associated content defined by geography and culture. The Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe, Doges Palace, Piazza San Marco, Giza Pyramid, and so forth have achieved a level of iconic recognition and value that places them within a cognitive frame outside of their actual context. This allows them to be experienced as an object, without one having to carry along all of their associated baggage of historical significance relationship to their setting, or the intent of their maker.

No where is this collapse of authenticity more true than the City of Venice, in and around the Piazza San Marco during tourist season. The residents of the city have left, leaving the upper level windows black at night. The city becomes a continuous shopping center during the day, filled with restaurants and hotels, interspersed by famous vistas photographed by tourists. The Piazza is completely packed, the cafes alive with music, the canals filled with gondolas, goods are sold on the street—tourists (and it seems only tourists) are everywhere. The city has transformed into pure commodity, both in terms of the actual goods for sale everywhere, as well as the image and marketing of the city itself as an object of consumption. The city is now a “bracketed” condition within its original memory. The more it is idealized as “Venice,” the more it meets the expectations those who visit, making it more of a commodity, thus further resulting in an idealization as “Venice,” setting even more orchestrated standards of performance, and so an ad infinitum. Disturbingly, this form of bracketing is much the same as that which occurs in recreated theme parks which one thought could never be confused with reality. But one suspects that if we were to fabricate a fake Venice, or an urban theme park at the scale of a city, it would look and feel much the same of the “real” thing.

The Luxor Hotel does not really have to incorporate an actual burial chamber to appropriate the pyramid form,¹⁸ the space inside the Louvre fragment of the Hotel Paris works equally well filled with slot machines or art work, and “Grand Central Station” in the Hotel New York-New York doesn’t have to lead one to the train and connect the commuter to the country. These vessels are emptied of their original content, serve other uses, and act as “stand-ins,” or signs for other places that are by now, as spectacles of commodity, only distantly connected to the real breadth of their cultural significance.¹⁹ The tourist comes along, and captures its image in a snapshot, perhaps hears the story behind it (which can take various liberties from the truth), stays for a few hours, and then moves on to experience, or consume, the next site..

As the history of the source become more distant, and possibly less relevant to the present, it becomes in a sense “smaller,” and reduced in significance.²⁰ The local culture in Venice or Paris is far more related to current, universal cultural codes and desires of the emerging global society than the comparatively minuscule peculiarities surrounding the original monuments. This fading of history and the specificity of context tends to “flatten” the differences between the real source, and the accurate re-representation of the source, whether copied through pictorial representation in a brochure, packaged in a tour of highlighted sights, or actually re-built, as in Las Vegas. With the appropriation becoming ever closer in resemblance to the authentic original, both as physical artifact and experience, the differences fade, and the value of the authentic becomes almost inconsequential. The appropriation can now proclaim victory—it has become as good, and in ways better, than the original--choosing one over the other is of little consequence.

Notes

1. Probably the first, and certainly the best description of the early Las Vegas scene is found in “Las Vegas (What) Las Vegas (Can’t Hear You! Too Noisy) Las Vegas!!!,” from Tom Wolf, *Kandy Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby*, New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1965.

2. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1972.
3. There are a number of seminal publications in the years around the publication of *Learning from Las Vegas*, most of which stress the traditional historical model of the European city. Included would be:

Edmund N. Bacon, *Design of Cities*, New York: Viking Press, 1967.

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Matrix of Man*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968.

AEJ Morris, *History of Urban Form*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1972.

Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City*, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1978 (based earlier *Architectural Design* essay of 1975.)
4. The best documentation of the Fair is found in: Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*, New York: Bounty Books, 1894 (and facsimile, n.d.). A significant reading of City Beautiful is by Mario Manieri-Elia, "Toward an 'Imperial City': Daniel H. Burnham and the City Beautiful Movement," in *The American City: From the Civil War to the New Deal*, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1979.
5. Steve Wynn, the owner who assembled the collection has since sold the hotel, and the new owners (MGM Hotels) have closed the gallery, and are slowly selling off the collection.
6. Ironically, this is partly due to the fact that as the automobile traffic has increased, stoplights are timed to encourage pedestrian crossings, which has then worsened automobile traffic, and has thus cycled into increased pedestrian connections between hotels.
7. The orchestrated linking of the three events by water is no accident, as all three hotels are under the same ownership.

8. This kind of marginalization due to what seemed like idiosyncratic subject matter was the fate also suffered by Venturi/Scott Brown/Iznavour's *Learning From Las Vegas*.
9. This is the central argument of Walter Benjamin discussed in his seminal "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations* (ed. By Hannah Arendt), New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
10. M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1994, pp. 175-76
11. See Luigi Fiacussi, *Piranesi: The Complete Etchings*, Cologne: Taschen Publications, 2000, p. 334.
12. Boyer, *Op. cit.*, pp. 179-181.
13. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., Columbia University, pp. 23-26.
14. See Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, Patrick Camiller, trans., London and New York: Verso Press, 1989.
15. This is a fundamental premise of Marcel Duchamp's selection of actual artifacts to become "Readymades," or objects which are taken "out of the earth and [are placed] onto the planet of aesthetics" through the artist's choice of appropriation. For a thorough discussion of Duchamp's contribution, see Frances M. Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, New York: Harry Abrams, 1999, p.19.
16. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973, pp. 3-5.
17. Some of the enduring architectural types, or forms, which can recur through the repetition of their formal structure, would include

the palace, courtyard, rowhouse, tower, and stadium. The use of typological methods in architecture are examined in: Also Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, Cambridge; M.I.T. Press, 1984, and Rafael Moneo, "On Typology," from *Oppositions*, Vol. 13, Summer, 1978.

18. The Luxor does, however, contain a researched replication of the Tomb of King Tut, which has been "authenticated" by an Egyptian expert to be completely accurate, down to the smallest detail.
19. The notion of the city as spectacle, the split between image and reality, and the principle of "commodity fetishism," is based on Guy Dubord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books, 1995, pp.12-15, 26.
20. Rem Koolhaas, "The Generic City," from Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL*, New York: Monacelli Press, 1995, p. 1263.