

## Las Vegas Transformed Part 11: The New American City



*The Las Vegas Strip Looking North*

Control was the underlying aspiration of many of the urban design experiments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which promised efficiency, order, connections, and choice. It was thought that the only way it could be achieved was through the mandates of a public authority, or some agency of the city, to make sure that all the individual parts could be coordinated, and perform the way they were supposed to. This meant that the land itself had to be owned by the municipality, and then leased or sold to private developers, so that that all kinds of building limitations and rules could be imposed. This is the way that many of the large-scale urban renewal housing projects were developed in the United States in the 1950's, as well as large public projects in Europe. These projects sometimes took on the scale of new towns, and had more than a passing resemblance to urban development throughout Scandinavian and Eastern European countries all based in the common denominator of land being owned, controlled and developed through municipal control.

The results of city-sponsored projects vary widely, as do the contexts, zoning concepts, and levels of public control. But common to

most of them their ubiquitous redundancy, characterized by blind repetition, dullness, lack of freedom, and a disconnection between the culture and needs of the inhabitants and the buildings and infrastructure that enables the inhabitant to dwell and function. Rules applied to one development were blindly applied to another. Formulas that came out of the planning offices in New York were applied to developments in other cities, and other climates. Worker's housing in Europe could be equally transplanted to low income housing in Dallas, or a suburban office park.

The opposite model of city-building is based on parcelization, in which a multitude of owners incrementally develop separate properties of limited scale, resulting in different buildings, styles, and programs, cheek to jowl, developed over time, interspersed by a smattering of public plazas/parks, and all defined within a grid of public streets. The privately developed capitalist city generates random, laissez-faire development resulting in little order or control, but allowing infinite possibilities of accommodation and aesthetic variety.

Las Vegas is based on a radically different model that tries to have it both ways. It is perhaps a new form of "bounded" capitalist city, in which the land is privately owned and developed, but there is only one, or very few landowners that have common interests, and are on speaking (make that "dealing") terms with one another. The result is that the individual parts, in this case, the hotels, possess even greater levels of control than anything mandated by the city—but the control is precisely tuned and managed to generate the highest degree of variability and individuality. Control—made to look like there is no control. The overriding concept of "theme as entertainment" becomes the directive, which leads to the ultimate coordination of every component within a particular hotel complex, and the ability to be unique and differentiated from one hotel to another. So while the Circus-Circus Corporation, for instance, could easily copy certain formula between their projects, they are cognizant of the need to do just the opposite, hire different architects and sign designers, but closely direct and orchestrate the range of experiences throughout their seven properties.

In today's global scale of economics, the number of players has become limited (as is true with the production of most of today's

commodities) and only very best can compete. The larger hotels finance other hotel development, and these developments have been further bought out and consolidated by only a few giant corporations, which now own the majority of major hotels on the Strip. Circus-Circus Enterprises, by far the largest, owns and manages the Mirage, Caesar's, Monte Carlo, Excalibur, Luxor, and Mandalay Bay. The Hilton Corporation owns Bally's, the Flamingo and the Paris as well as the Las Vegas Hilton. There are other owners along the Strip who are also in competition to outdo the other (as in the 1999 development of the Hotel Bellagio and Hotel Paris across the street from one another), but they all realize that it is in everyone's best interest to relate to the theme formula, do it equally well, and reinforce it. Competition only raises the bar a little, encourages invention, and improves the identity of the overall Las Vegas experience, which benefits every property, whether they're a major or minor participant.

These Owners are very experienced, know their market, and basically agree on what the nature of the Las Vegas concept, experiences, and images should be. The result is an ability to maintain specific standards, and perform in a particular way. Resources, such as entertainers and personnel are shared, and the economies of scale through huge supply purchases and central administration are realized. No bureaucracy gets in the way here—decisions are made by a small number of participants, they all agree on the basic formula, and the resulting economics have proven it to work. The variety of images, signs, and architecture presents a powerful illusion that it's all wildly out of control, as part of the excitement of constantly confronting something new around every corner. But we all fooled—the opposite is the case! Every sign, theme, performer is carefully considered, and presented for the maximum effect.

Las Vegas has achieved a new form of hybrid city defined by a scale of corporate ownership that exerts complete control within its boundaries. The model for this city of controlled, coordinated effects would be the early Disney theme parks which also present wildly diverse images and experiences, with the ultimate coordination through being executed by a single owner who can exert complete design control over every stimulus.<sup>1</sup> But the difference is now one of scale. The Strip is part of a larger city, with public streets, traffic, diverse

commercial development, and is built over an extended area. It is neither the city as a single private owner or a public development authority defining a closed order on the one hand, or, the open American City of maximum freedom and laissez-faire development on the other. It is a city that *seems* to allow for all of our desires for choice and entertainment, without letting us in on the fact that it is a product of planned control beyond the wildest dreams of the city planners.

Thus, we have the ultimate double illusion worthy of film: the presentation of a total fantasy which we know to be false, within a disguised fantasy in a form of distorted reality. The participant believes this condition is out-of-control, breaks the rules, and surprises, when in fact it is almost all controlled, with the surprises carefully planned. Like the performance of a great actor, the delivery is presented as being natural, and seems real, while in fact it is the result of a studied discipline, consciously getting it to come out a particular way.

### **The Transformation of Private Space**

The recent transformation of the Las Vegas Strip presents a new paradigm of urban space based on radically different notions of the relationship of public and private realms. Typically, public and private exist as polar oppositions: the traditional city is defined as public easements (streets), parks and public institutions owned and controlled by a municipality, which are potentially highly ordered and interrelated. This public realm further defines a matrix of private parcels, which are owned and individually developed, with generally high degrees of differentiation and independence. The typical city in America is a kind of game board of public streets and institutions (typically highly ordered), which structure an array of autonomous, unrelated buildings, or “spare parts” (typically highly disordered).<sup>2</sup> Individual buildings and blocks have virtually no relationship, or dependence on any other parcel, even if across the street. Rem Koolhaas has referred to this generic condition of urban blocks and parcelization of private building sites as archipelagos, or islands of independent, particularized development floating in a sea of connective space.<sup>3</sup>



*Interior of the Luxor Hotel*

Las Vegas shares a commonality with any other American city in that it is essentially a product of the private realm--but there's a critical difference: The buildings on the Strip may be private, individualized and physically separated, and even more articulated examples of Koolhaas' private islands. But in terms of use, the hotels have actually become intertwined into a kind of continuous space of public access, even though they are still privately owned. In fact, the space of the hotel isn't treated as private space at all—the visitor is allowed, and even encouraged to visit from one hotel to another. Each hotel can stand alone, but the experience of the overall spectacle is only understood and completed when you venture beyond to other deeper internal realms which in most buildings outside Los Vegas would be off-limits.

A important by-product of this expanded experience is the financial benefit gained through visitors venturing beyond the limits of one's own hotel, which only can happen if all of the public spaces of the private hotels are open and accessible. The spectacular shows and clubs of one hotel depend as much on the support of guests staying at other hotels. There are indeed front doors, reception spaces, concierges and the like, but no one stops you, and you are even welcomed in as an undeclared guest of the city at-large. Once inside, one continues to

freely circulate and amble through a continuing unveiling of surprises, and then can continue outside on public (actually, private) walks to the next hotel. Thus, all of the space, while extended along the strip and differentiated within individual buildings starts to become an open, continuous, interrelated experience, not unlike visiting the individual sites within a single theme park (or the dream of an ideal modernist city). A city without doors.

What makes this all possible is that the space outside the hotel is no longer treated as a place for parking, expressively diagrammed in Venturi's study, but is now exploited to facilitate, or even direct connections between different hotels. And since there are only a few large corporate owners that own most of the hotels, it is easy to achieve agreement to construct private, pedestrian linkages that supplant the public streets. One can now circulate by foot on elevated walkways to move between the Tropicana, Excaliber, Luxor, New York New York and MGM Grand Hotels, without having to cross a vehicular street. The Barbary Coast Hotel, Caesar's Palace, Bally's, the Bellagio are also linked by new pedestrian walkways, forming another hierarchy of directed connections. Even the Strip itself, the ultimate vehicular experience is becoming a landscaped boulevard, defining space for the pedestrian to maneuver within eight lanes of traffic.

Of course, the scale of the strip demands another strategy to interconnect the hotels as a continuous experience beyond the use of pedestrian walkways and elevated bridges. Mass transit systems have been implemented by corporate ownership with very deep pockets, justified by the vast scales of private investment needed for 3000-room hotels. Properties have been conveniently connected by the construction of elevated monorails, probably again inspired by the earlier example of Disney World's monorail in Orlando, which connects hotels to the theme parks. In 1995, MGM and Bally's funded the construction of a 1 mile-long line that connects the two hotels, as well as the Hotel Paris, forming a kind of continuous hotel with a vast array of amenities. The monorail is free, and has a rider ship of over 15,000 people/day. Another monorail was built to connect the Bellagio, Monte Carlo, and Mandalay Bay hotels together, which can then link to a tram connecting the Mandalay Bay to the Luxor and Excaliber Hotels. These tramways, as well as the ability of management to cross-program

through consolidated ownership, form the development of a kind of “continuous hotel,” a linked systems of public space with an array of themes, amenities, entertainment and other features that are beyond the ability for any single hotel to achieve.

### **Las Vegas as a New Urban Paradigm**

It is tempting to reduce the significance of Las Vegas to its qualities as a unique American cultural experience, an urban theme park of unparalleled quality of execution, or a model of an incredibly successful business formula. But it is equally possible to extend the earlier discussed description of its form and characteristics as to act as an alternative model for the development of the city. Perhaps the most pertinent possibility for application (and the greater crises) is the plight of the suburbs, in which incessant sprawl, overwhelming dullness, chaotic development, traffic congestion, and an almost total reliance on the automobile have become paradigms of failed planning. If one simply strips away the image of Las Vegas, its glitter, sometimes tasteless architecture, signs, connotations of the theme park, and all the rest, it perhaps can be suggested, that there actually are principles of significant value at work, and even the possibility of a wide range of application for outer city development.

It is proposed first to understand Las Vegas as not simply a series of hotels along a strip, but as a sequence of very large conglomerate assemblies of a full range of urban functions, a kind of city in miniature. Each contain facilities for eating, a wide variety of entertainment choices (both of a high and low nature), conference facilities, connections to advanced communications, the ubiquitous gambling hall, and transient, as well as some permanent housing. These all constitute the primary employment and economic engines of the city. They are then tied together into a larger organization through clear systems of movement, adequate parking, and successfully incorporate mass transit.

Conceiving of architecture as an analog of the city is not uncommon--it has long been one of the precepts of the development of modern architecture.<sup>4</sup> But the Las Vegas Strip also suggests the possibility of the city as an analog of architecture, or in other words, that the city is conceived as a series of very large, programmatically

comprehensive forms of architecture that perform as small cities. Each one is identifiable, relatively self-sufficient, yet connected to one another for their mutual benefit. These vast hotels are about “bigness [that] instigates the regime of complexity,” with all of the choices of activity, interactive events, and messiness of life itself intact.<sup>5</sup> As architecture, the hotel is made up of interactive parts that are designed to function well together, in a highly specific manner. In a similar manner, the city as complex architectural assemblages can be orchestrated and controlled, i.e., *designed* with the various buildings and programmatic requirements being situated in the most appropriate location and forms, and precisely to best serve the needs of the inhabitants. The paradigm of city as architecture suggests that the forms and spaces of the city can be varied and diverse, yet also be interrelated and coordinated. The idea is the conception of a series of large-scale building projects comparable to the diversity of the hotels already described, rather than the small-scaled, individual redundancy of our existing suburbs.

It isn't that radical to imagine the possibilities to transform the analogue: The high-rise hotel component of a hotel can as easily be transformed into high-rise housing, or broken down into a hierarchy of housing types of great diversity and variety. The open space, natural amenities, commercial services, parking and circulation are all in place. The incorporation of monorails and other forms of mass transit to promote pedestrian relationships would certainly be welcome. Even the vast interior gambling casinos can take on public, institutional roles stitched into the community. Simply remove the slot machines and gambling tables, and the loft spaces (at a somewhat reduced scale, or sub-divided) can serve any number of community, work, and educational functions.

The Las Vegas model suggests that each of these architectural assemblages can acquire variation and identity, accomplishing the “city of difference,” an environment of wildly different choices and options, while all carefully orchestrated to facilitate the best possible functioning, and most enhanced effects and living experiences. The choices are presented right up front, narrated by the obvious differences of architectural themes. Should we stay in a pyramid, a Chrysler high-rise, or a chateau in the sky? Do we want to experience a South Seas

island (the Mandalay), Paris, Venice, Egypt, or an Italian Lake town? So many choices—and so little time! If the differences in terms of imagery and experience aren't completely authentic, and don't really cause the organization to vary that much, they still present identifiable places, and function well.



*“Piazza San Marco” Within the Venetian Hotel*

Many of these different experiences are based on intentional reversals of expectations. For instance, in traditional urban space, there are clear and obvious differences between inside and outside. One expects that outside space is expansive, open to the sky, while the interiors are restrictive, with defining ceilings. But in the typical casino experience, the space is so vast and expansive that one can't even perceive clear boundaries. In some of the recent theme hotels, such as the Paris and the Venetian, the ceiling is painted a sky blue with white clouds, a *tromp-doile* so realistically done that it truly does seem to perform as a limitless sky. If we know it's not an *actual* sky, it certainly is a sky that precisely duplicates our experience of observing skies remembered from earlier experience. The effect is especially jarring in the evening, when we are outside in the dark, and walk inside to a daylight sky, as if one is entering into a Magritte painting.<sup>7</sup> The interiors also contain the fountains, sidewalks, benches, statuary and planting typical of traditional exterior streetscapes, with the charade

sometimes going to absurd lengths to destroy the traditional boundaries between inside and outside. The Venice extends a canal of water, complete with gondolas, along an interior shopping street; the New York New York Hotel gushes steam from “manholes” in streets replicating Little Italy, Greenwich Village, and other miniaturized neighborhoods placed inside the hotel. Conversely, the open patio gardens by the outside pool have all the lounging amenities of one’s apartment, complete with showers, and even massage tables, open to public view.

This blurring of exterior and interior space is a necessary condition if one is going to represent other places, typically well-known public, exterior spaces in protected environments which can be open (and earn income) 24 hours/day, even when the temperature hits 110 degrees in the shade. The public street, normally outside, is now placed inside, with all the intense activity, associations, and flow of pedestrian traffic as we might find on any traditional public street. Within the incredible expanses of the casino halls and shopping arcades, mixed with restaurants, atria, and gardens, there is an intense urban life, with no need of other private buildings and events to activate the interior. There is no longer a demarcation of public and private—it’s all public, open and accessible, and at the same time, it’s all privately owned and controlled. Whereas once the design of a city was based on a polar opposition between clearly demarcated public and private space, Las Vegas introduces the possibility of a collapse between public and private, and inside and outside into reversible conditions, totally malleable and interchangeable, in which the expectations that one has of being inside, or private are suddenly shifted, and reversed without notice, or reason.. Thus, the meaning and use of space becomes subjective, open to reinterpretation, resistant to fixed rules, and shifted from normal expectations.



*Interior Garden of the Bellagio Hotel*

Perhaps the most important lesson of Las Vegas is the subversion from what has been the enduring paradigm of modernist space. Rather than the infinite extension and continuity of the grid and street as an open limitless field, the Las Vegas hotel complexes form a series of tightly clustered, closed spatial boundaries compressed along a vehicular spine. Implicit within this model is the fact that there are bounded *limits* to laissez-fair expansion: Within the hotel complex is the tightly bounded cluster, while outside the cluster is the formation of open, non-programmed, interstitial space. Typically, such space has always been a kind of left over condition, not to be experienced except by getting through it by automobile to get to the next event.<sup>8</sup> But the recent developments along the Strip have generated a new role for the space outside the hotels, showing the possibility of new scales of regional landscape and comprehensive programming (as seen in, for instance, the Bellagio lake) that performs as a critical antidote to the disorder and clutter of urban sprawl.

Las Vegas begins to fulfill the dream of the “open” city in continuous motion, accessible, taken over by a public needing to take it all in, and pack as many experiences into as short a time as possible. It is a city based on the possibilities of leisure and our modern desire for themed entertainment, and the exploitation of current media and popular culture. While it might not seem to be the city that can fulfill

the highest aspirations of urban design, it is closer than we think to being the city that is closest to the current desires and manifestations of contemporary urban culture. It may not be completely real, or authentic, but does it matter? We know that the ubiquitous condition of the synthetic in contemporary culture has blurred the traditional polar boundaries of the real vs. artificial, public vs. private and the interior vs. the exterior. We have entered into the condition of the synthetic city, and Las Vegas, perhaps more than any other city or urban experience represents some of its clearest manifestation and possibilities.

1. The quality of control in Disneyland goes beyond ownership; the ongoing maintenance and servicing of the spectacle is kept invisible through its hidden network of tunnels that insures that everything above will be kept clean and in good working order, without disturbing the perfection of the seen fantasy.
2. The notion of the built artifacts of the city as a collection of “spare parts” is discussed by Jacquelin Robertson in “The Current Crises of Disorder,” from *Education for Urban Design* edited by Ann Ferebee, New York: Institute for Urban Design, 1982.
3. “The City of the Captive Globe,” in Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, New York: Monacelli Press, Inc. 1994, pp. 294-6.
4. Aldo Van Eyck, “Transcript from Otterlo Meeting,” from Alison Smithson (ed), *Team 10 Primer*, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968, p. 27.
5. Rem Koolhaas, “Bigness, or the Problem of Large,” from *S,M,L,XL*, op. cit., p. 495)
6. This kind of large-scale development with comprehensive control and coordination has sometimes been carried out. One of the more publicized examples is Disney Corporation’s development of “Celebration,” a cohesive suburban neighborhood based on the traditional design theories of “The New Urbanism.”

7. One of Magritte's more notorious images of a darkened scene against a daylight sky is exemplified by "The Dominion of Light" of 1954, and similar works from the same series. See: Todd Alden, *The Essential Rene Magritte*, New York: Abrams, 1999, p. 89.
  
8. Venturi went to great pains to elaborate on the possibilities of ceremonial (transitional) space between hotel and Strip, even including "asphalt" (parking lots) as having a specific role in the organization. See *Learning From Las Vegas*, op. cit., pp. 24-5.