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Al, Stefan

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Welcome to Theoretical Las Vegas

By Stefan Al

Abstract

Las Vegas, a city often theorized as the ultimate spectacular city, has a commensurate history of spectacular theories. This essay explores the connections between urban theory and spectacle through etymology, a brief history of the literature on Las Vegas, and an encounter between a Las Vegas urban planner and a theorist.



Figure 1. Title from author

“Having many ... urban planners gathering in Las Vegas is not exactly the same as if a convention of temperance advocates were meeting here. Nonetheless I think there’s still a bit of a sense of discordance between this group and what it stands for and the place in which you are meeting. It seems to be a little bit of a paradox — urbanists meeting in the ultimate nonurban city.”¹

May 2, 2008, Paris Hotel, Las Vegas: Closing keynote speech of the American Planning Association’s 100th Conference

By the time *New York Times* architecture critic Paul Goldberger uttered his opening lines, he had almost everyone in the room laughing. It set the tone for what followed in his diagnosis of the city. “The one thing Las

¹ All quotes in this section are taken from: Schoemann, Joe. 2008. Planning official up in arms over putdowns of Las Vegas. *Las Vegas Sun*, May 3.

Vegas does not do well is thinking of itself in historical terms ... Anything that promotes looking back is, by definition, unwelcome in this city," he said. "Las Vegas wished the downtown would simply evaporate."

After the talk, Las Vegas planning director Margo Wheeler hurried to the stage. "Judging Las Vegas based on the Strip would be like me going to Manhattan and judging all of New York City on Times Square," she said. "We had historical walking tours, driving tours. Just this morning I left a session that we did on the Neon Museum and putting the neon back on Las Vegas Boulevard. That's history. What about the Mob Museum?"

Goldberger later admonished himself, saying that while he did consider renting a car in order to tour the downtown, it remained only a thought. Meanwhile, a photographer took a shot of the confrontation, and yelled: "Come on, Paul, say something nice about Las Vegas!"

Hours after the incident, Wheeler spoke to a reporter "with a force and emotion that had her almost gasping for air." She was unwilling to let go of the speech. "It's interesting that Las Vegas don't care about downtown, but the planning director and mayor live within walking distance of City Hall," she said. "I just think there's a side to Las Vegas he's never seen."

Theory as Spectacle

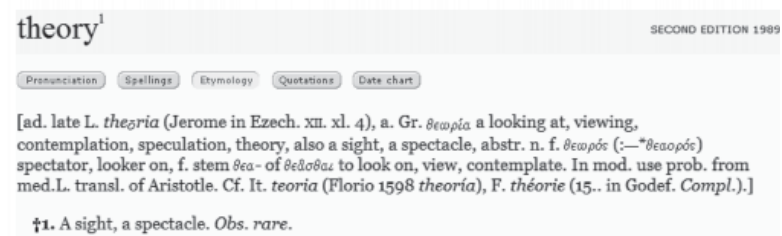


Figure 2. Definition of theory from Oxford English Dictionary

The confrontation between Las Vegas planning director Margot Wheeler and Pulitzer Prize winner Paul Goldberger was an instant in which the gap between theory and reality revealed itself. It is rare that theorists are publicly held accountable for their views and problematizations outside of the academy. It would be hard to find a better opportunity to reflect on Las Vegas as a "problem space."

Three points can be made from this occasion, points which emerge from a central argument, which is that in the case of Las Vegas, urban theory has mostly been spectacle. Etymologically, this should come as

no surprise, since theory is connected to the English word theatre, and derived from Greek *theoria* which means “looking at a show.” Theory, as a way of seeing a particular phenomenon, has always been connected to spectacle, with the difference that in Las Vegas the *subject* of seeing – the theorist or spectator – cedes to become the *object*: a spectacle to look at. As a consequence of this phenomenon, a space opens up for my successive theorization.

My first point is that the object of analysis, in the process of theorizing, gets ontological status. In theory, Las Vegas “does” and “wishes,” as if it were a conscious being with agency. Different factions, professions, and even classes are generalized in the all-encompassing *The City*. *The City* is a reified object.

Secondly, in theorizing a city, some spaces are seen as more exemplary of *The City* than others. More spectacular and visible spaces are often conflated with the typical. In the case of Las Vegas, the Las Vegas Strip becomes *The City*. The irony is that the Strip actually lies outside of Las Vegas city limits, in an unincorporated township of Clark County. Even though the Strip is technically not in the city of Las Vegas, it is its de facto synonym. And despite that most of the Las Vegas metropolitan area is actually dotted with detached single family homes, this is a fact easily overlooked, because suburbs are far less spectacular objects of theorization.

As a final point, the performance and packaging of *The City* becomes a spectacle. *The City* is there to entertain, to get attention, to be bought and sold. Essentially, *The City* is a commodity. It was no coincidence that a theorist, not a planner, was asked to deliver the closing speech of the 100th American Planning Association. Theorists are far better entertainers. Goldberger did his job well, and despite the controversy, or perhaps because of it, APA honored him by inviting him to give the annual L’Enfant Lecture on City Planning and Design – again on Las Vegas, of course.

Spectacular Theories of Las Vegas

“To analyze the spectacle means talking its language to some degree -- to the degree, in fact, that we are obliged to engage the methodology of the society to which the spectacle gives expression.”

Debord, Guy. The Society of the Spectacle. Thesis 11.

When we put the event into context, it becomes clear that Las Vegas, often theorized as the ultimate spectacular city, has a commensurate history of

philosopher, wrote an entire book on the city. He saw Las Vegas as a *Zeropolis*, a city of nothing, with an “urbanity of nothingness.”⁵ A University of Nevada, Las Vegas, professor contested the analysis: “If that’s the case, I’d like a full refund of my real estate taxes, and the cops and firefighters are probably wondering why they’ve been getting paid to watch over “nothingness” all these years.”⁶

Finally, Las Vegas theory reaches a spectacular and sophisticated climax with Baudrillard, the unparalleled star of theory. He refers to Las Vegas in his *Simulations and Simulacra* as well as in his later *America* as a phenomenon of the hyperreal. In his lesser known career as a photographer, he even took a picture of the city with the title “Las Vegas.” It foregrounds a massive billboard that, to the viewer’s surprise, is blank. Baudrillard captured a billboard that does not speak, and thus found a perfect outcome of Marshall McLuhan’s famous maxim “The Medium is the Message.” For a Las Vegas theorist, there is no better image than the empty sign, an example of one of the “cracks opening in the illusion of reality,”⁷ illustrating the ‘emptiness’ of the spectacle that is Las Vegas.

On the other hand, for a theorist of Las Vegas theories, there is no better image than the heated confrontation between Wheeler and Goldberger, revealing a crack in the illusion of theory as spectacle – the spectacle that is *The City*.

⁵ Bégout, Bruce. 2003. *Zeropolis: The experience of Las Vegas*. London: Reaktion.

⁶ Schwartz, David. Book Review: *Zeropolis*. <http://www.dieiscast.com/2008/02/19/book-review-zeropolis/> accessed 3 February 2009.

⁷ Coulter, Gerry. 2008. Baudrillardian Photography in the Contemporary. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*. V (1).

Stefan Al is a Dutch architect and urbanist, currently based at UC Berkeley where he is getting is doctorate in city and regional planning. He is writing his dissertation on Las Vegas, titled Spectacular Urbanism: Enterprise and Paradise in Las Vegas.