The Strip: Las Vegas and the Symbolic Destruction of Spectacle

By

Stefan Johannes Al

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Committee in charge:

Professor Nezar AlSayyad, Chair
Professor Greig Crysler
Professor Ananya Roy
Professor Michael Southworth

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Abstract

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Over the past 70 years, various actors have dramatically reconfigured the Las Vegas Strip in many forms. I claim that behind the Strip's "reinventions" lies a process of symbolic destruction. Since resorts distinguish themselves symbolically, each new round of capital accumulation relies on the destruction of symbolic capital of existing resorts. A new resort either ups the language within a paradigm, or causes a paradigm shift, which devalues the previous resorts even further. This is why, in the context of the Strip, buildings have such a short lifespan.

This dissertation is chronologically structured around the four building booms of new resort construction that occurred on the Strip. Historically, there are periodic waves of new casino resort constructions with continuous upgrades and renovation projects in between. They have been successively theorized as suburbanization, corporatization, Disneyfication, and global branding. Each building boom either conforms to a single paradigm or witnesses a paradigm shift halfway: these paradigms have been theorized as Wild West, Los Angeles Cool, Pop City, Corporate Modern, Disneyland, Sim City, and Starchitecture.

During the first building boom on the Las Vegas Strip, a dusty little road suburbanized into a neon vernacular landscape of low-rise, solipsistic casino resorts that had taken over downtown Las Vegas as the new suburban center of the city. The Strip managed to take over downtown because suburbanization was used an effective technology of separation and isolation of people beneficial to the gambling industry, plus the suburban form gambling took on the Strip provided better images to disseminate at a time when suburbanization was a phenomenon that occurred across the United States. During the second building boom, the Strip morphed stylistically from pop to modern, and typologically from low-rise bungalow with tall, eccentric neon signage to high-rise megaresort, fronted by a sea of whiteboard corporate logos. Underneath this change lay a transformation of the financial structure: Teamster pensions had found a commensurate architectural expression in the spectacle of pop, until corporate financing took over, and

the spectacle of corporatism prevailed. Resorts appropriate a corporate model derived from Walt Disney Company during the third building boom, the “Disneyfication” of the Strip. Resorts had taken over Disney-like qualities, providing urban theme park attractions and symbolized imaginary places first and real places later. During the fourth building boom resorts appropriate a contemporary style of architecture that lays a claim on authenticity, devaluing the themed resorts. At a time when corporations appropriate elite architecture as part of their global brand identity, so adopts the Strip star architecture as the new fetish.

The historicization of “spectacle” of the Las Vegas Strip fills the gap between theories of spectacle that are low on the specifics of history, and the histories of Las Vegas that are low on theory. Moreover, it situates Las Vegas in a discussion of other places, as a postmodern and neoliberal city *avant la lettre*, which is important, since the Las Vegas Strip is increasingly regarded as a planning model for cities around the world, for better or worse.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Image 1: The Recurring Ruination of Las Vegas

Image 2: The 'Model' City

Image 3: Decamping the Deluge of Spectacle

Each epoch not only dreams the next, but also, in dreaming, strives toward the moment of waking. It bears its end in itself and unfolds it – as Hegel already saw – with ruse. In the convulsions of the commodity economy we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.[1]

- Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capital of the 19th Century*

Image 1: The Recurring Ruination of Las Vegas

There had not been a more impressive implosion in history. *The New York Times* called it "perhaps the most lavishly choreographed architectural bombing in United States History".[2] For six full minutes, thousands of pyrotechnic devices shot apart from the Dunes hotel, filling the sky above the Strip. The Dunes sign, which for the occasion spelled "No vacancy", was more hyperactive than ever, its red lighting feverishly moving up and down. A salvo of firebombs built to a crescendo. The spectacle culminated when 1600 liters of aviation fuel powered an all-consuming fireball. Only a few seconds later, pounds of dynamite decimated the tower. The building collapsed quickly, but in a controlled manner; it leaned towards its back, so it would land on the backside pools as a provisional grave. In tandem, the red Dunes sign graciously tumbled on its side. The Dunes had died a spectacular death.

More than 200,000 spectators witnessed the death of the hotel, yelling deliriously and in awe. The joined forces of a demolition and fireworks company turned the obliteration of the Dunes tower, barely 26 years old, into a celebration. The ruination of the Dunes was also a celebration because Las Vegans knew something else would come in its place. Already before the Dunes had been decimated, new plans of its successor, the Bellagio, were in the works. Moreover, the Dunes' decimation coincided with the inauguration of a new resort, the Treasure Island. Two faux battleships fronted the Pirate themed resort, one of which that sank every three hours, live on the Strip. In a dramatic moment, their cannons shot at of the Dunes tower, setting off the implosion. It symbolically connected the opening of the Treasure Island with the death of the Dunes. By turning demolition into a spectator sport, the ruination of the Dunes was made into an advertisement for the new casino.

Robert Beckmann captured the moment the spectacle reached its apotheosis, when fireworks filled the sky and a fireball engulfed the structure, in a painting titled "Renewal". [See Image 1] Part of his "Vegas Vanitas" series, he pasted the fiery Dunes, on the verge of its collapse, in a 1776 painting of Joseph Wright of Derby called the "Annual Girandola of Castel St. Angelo, Rome". Just like Strip resorts had pillaged from other places, mimicking an Eiffel tower, the Sphinx, and Venetian canals, Robert Beckmann profaned an old master to his own advantage. Beckmann, a Las Vegas based painter, knew well from what paintings to plunder. By building on the 18th century landscape, painter Beckmann borrowed its timeless quality. All Beckmann had to do was to insert the fiery Dunes.

In the same way that Beckmann pillaged from Joseph Wright of Derby, I pillage from Beckmann. This introduction is based on three of his images, in which I use my interpretations of his paintings to introduce my dissertation. In doing so, it is obvious I will remake their meaning, or his initial intention of the painting, just like he had done by basing his paintings on classics. This is precisely the reason why some cultural elitists hate Las Vegas: for its profane pillaging, or "debasing", of sacred, cultured symbols. But knowing that neither the Strip, nor Beckmann, worried how their adaptations might have left the originals, I continue this project, pillaging freely both from Beckmann and the Strip.

The Dunes implosion was the first and most impressive in a series of implosions. The Las Vegas Strip, coined by some as the "Implosion Capital of the World", has arguably seen the largest amount of implosions in the world; within a period of only sixteen years, between 1993 and 2007, the Strip witnessed fifteen implosions. The Strip is a destructive battlefield, where buildings find their graveyard prematurely, their lifespan shortened like cannon fodder on the front line. On the flipside of the Strip's ruination, lies its renewal. Since buildings get replaced so quickly, the Strip "reinvents" itself so often. The Strip is the only street in the world that looks radically different every decade. But why is it that buildings outdate so quickly in the context of the Strip?

This dissertation studies the history of the Las Vegas Strip. I claim that the case of the Las Vegas Strip teaches us about the economy of symbols, and the role of architecture and urbanism in participating in this symbolic economy. Architecture and urbanism do not just have economic dimensions, they have symbolic aspects as well; they are part and parcel of the production of "symbolic capital". And it is mainly the instability of this symbolic capital that explains why hotels get imploded, even though they still might be efficiently functional and could continue to exist when new additions add to the capacity of the resort. Behind the Strip's "reinventions" lies a process of symbolic destruction. Each new round of capital accumulation relies on the destruction of symbolic capital of existing resorts.

Symbolic capital is a major currency on the Strip. The application of symbols in the built environment is important for casinos; they compete with symbols for a number of reasons. First of all, casino odds are basically the same everywhere, so casinos have to compete based on characteristics other than price. Therefore, they differentiate themselves with their symbolic aspects. These aspects, a casino's "symbolic capital", do

not lie inside the casino itself; rather, they lie in a society that bestows value to it. Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as "the collection of luxury goods attesting the taste and distinction of their owner." [3] Symbolic value is subjective; and people's opinions can be shaped.

Symbolic capital is raised typically through advertising; however, in the United States, provisions in the Communications Act of 1934 had banned private casinos to advertise gambling. Casinos could not explicitly advertise their goods: gambling. Therefore, they had to rely on their image, such as their physical facility, to attract customers. It is for these reasons that, throughout the history of the Strip, architecture has played an important role in the advertising of casinos. Typically, in press releases of new casino complexes, reference is made to their architectural features; they are always the biggest, newest, most unique, and most technologically advanced. This explains why casinos on the Strip with similar architectural programs, all look so different. A merely economic explanation cannot explain why these architectural programs are expressed so differently; symbolic capital does. But, the reason for raising symbolic capital is that it can eventually be converted into money capital: the higher the social standing of the resort, the higher the profits that can be made.

The notion of symbolic capital also explains why the Strip is so radically different from what lies around it. The Strip lies almost much like an isolated island inside the metropolitan area of Las Vegas, and within the Strip each resort is an island as well. It can be argues that as a symbol, each resort needs to protect itself; it needs to distinguish itself from what lies around it and clearly define its edges. Within each casino complex, there is a clear difference between the outside and inside of the property. On the outside, the casino typically has an obvious and monumental entrance, but inside, undulating paths diffuse throughout the resort. As a result of these different competing symbolic structures, the Strip is a linear landscape composed of different symbols that each appear as alien, and, strung up as a whole, lie fragmented and disengaged from the rest of the city.

The fundamentally unstable nature of symbolic capital explains the large amount of implosions; it is the instability of the sign that lies behind the "renewal" of the Las Vegas Strip. Resorts seek to destroy one another in a constant battle of symbols. When a resort that symbolizes the newest vision of the future opens on the Strip, the previous "best" casino drops to second place. Since architectural styles assign guests social status, the clientele of the new number two shifts to a lower price level. Every time this happens, the resort becomes less profitable, until it gets razed. The competitor's symbolic destruction – not to mention the destruction of "real" resources – is turned into profit. The innovative entry of entrepreneurs destroys the symbolic and, as a consequence, economic value of already existing resorts. Symbolic destruction eventually leads to "real" demolition. Competition between resorts through symbols leads to the exhaustion of their symbolic capital and, ultimately, to the destruction of resorts.

The case of Las Vegas informs us about the economy of symbols. It teaches us how symbolic capital is generated and how it gets destroyed. The constant symbolic wars between casinos lead to the cooptation of certain symbols, which leads to their exhaustion

or to the invention of new ones, which can cause a paradigm shift. This explains why the Las Vegas Strip has been reconfigured many times over the past seventy years. A space that participates in the symbolic economy can never be static, and it is under constant change. Such a space is characterized by creation *and* destruction. But whether the focus lies on destruction or creation, seems a question with an answer that depends on the time of writing. Once the last bastion of the American dream, now the heart of the financial crisis, it is obvious the pendulum swings with the economic tides.

Some theorists have already explained the constant change under capitalism but from different perspectives. Schumpeter coined and popularized the notion "creative destruction" as a critique of Marx's vision of the destructive power of capitalism. In his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, published in 1942, Schumpeter used the term to denote a "process of industrial mutation that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one." For Schumpeter, creative destruction allows for sustainable growth of capitalist economies. "Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism," he claimed. The innovative entry of entrepreneurs allows for economic growth, even as it destroys the value of existing companies.

However, some have coined this destructive nature of capitalism as "destructive creation", a reversal of Schumpeter's term. The term became popular with the global financial meltdown of 2007-2008, when banks went bankrupt because of financial innovations. It shows that on the flipside of creative destruction lie layoffs, bankruptcies, and waste. While Schumpeter suggests that innovation leads to economic growth, destructive creation happens when innovation is intended as destruction.

David Harvey has shown how destruction is essential to capitalist built environments. He claims how investment capital seeks to create and recreate the built environment and how destruction of the built environment is essential to capitalist accumulation. [4] In "The Urban Process under Capitalism", he pointed at the paradox that sometimes existing spatial structures, erected to raise profit, are "barriers to further accumulation", which can be removed only slowly, "unless there is a substantial devaluation of the exchange value locked up in the creation of these physical assets." [5] This "substantial devaluation" typically occurs at a crisis. Because of these crises, the capitalist built environment is under vehement and constant change. "Under capitalism there is, then, a perpetual struggle in which capital builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time, only to have to destroy it, usually in the course of a crisis, at a subsequent point in time. The temporal and geographical ebb and flow of investment in the built environment can be understood only in terms of such a process."[6] For instance, the Hausmannization of Paris was part destruction of the city and capital, but, at the same time, it enhanced further capitalist accumulation.

But while Harvey realized how economic conditions continue to revolutionize the urban fabric, in the case of the Strip, these economic conditions are mainly based on symbolic structures. The 'exchange value' of resorts on the Strip had always been largely determined by their symbolic value, which caused an even larger acceleration of turnover. Above all, resorts are imploded when their symbolic capital is no longer

valuable. In the face of competition, symbols lose their value more quickly. Resorts appropriate each other's symbols, which lead to their exhaustion, or introduce new ones, which outdates the old ones. In the face of excess, many people get bored, and in the face of novelty, people tend to discard the old. It is often not so much so that the rooms of older resorts are not as good, their casinos not big enough, or their parking lots too few, but more so that their symbolic value has been lost. Renovations and implosions happen because people's habits and tastes change, things get old, or people get tired of it having seen it. Symbolic capital devalues as people's tastes change: when people grow fatigued of the old and desire novelty.

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, when Harvey referred to postmodernism in the city, Harvey acknowledged the role of symbolic capital in the revolution of the urban fabric. "By exploring the realms of differentiated tastes and aesthetic preferences, architects and urban designers have re-emphasized an important aspects of capital accumulation ... symbolic capital."[7] However, elite architects and urban designers had not played a part in the production of the Strip until recently. It was the resort industry that determined what symbolic forms were culturally appropriate and "new", often based on the tastes of mass and popular culture and, at times, a reflection of the regime of capital.

Fredric Jameson sees the appropriation of cultural forms by commodities as the "logic of late capitalism".[8] According to Jameson, late capitalism has evolved by incorporating cultural forms in order to accelerate turnover. By integrating aesthetics in the realm of commodity production, capitalism can achieve a further accumulation. Even when the material needs of a society are satisfied, constant consumption can be achieved since aesthetics get outdated with the fickle condition of fashion. At the same time, by incorporating cultural forms, capitalism achieves a further colonization of the cultural sphere. It employs the instability of symbolic capital and ever changing cultural forms as a way to outdate products even when they are still fully functional.

On the Strip, we can see Jameson's argument manifested in the rapid turnover of the built environment. If creative destruction occurs because of symbolic "innovations", it is nothing more than style obsolescence, a form of planned obsolescence with an emphasis on destruction, not creation. Schumpeter imagined creative destruction as the fundamental improvement of a product, not simply a difference in mere packaging. The current states of consumer electronics and software show this principle in practice, in which products are deliberately designed with limited backward compatibility, in a series of careful omission of features that its future model will have, or designed with a limited lifespan. In short, these products are designed to fail; after their arrival on the market, they become outdated quickly, ready for the scrap heap.

Robert Venturi had already recognized the sign and façade obsolescence on the Las Vegas Strip in the late 1960s:

> "The rate of obsolescence of a sign seems to be nearer to that of an automobile than that of a building. The reason is not physical degeneration but what competitors are doing around you…. The most unique, most monumental parts of the Strip, the signs and casino facades, are also the most changeable; it is the

> neutral, systems-motel structures behind that survive a succession of facelifts and a series of themes up front."

However, the destruction on the Las Vegas Strip grew exponentially from facelifts and changes in signage to the implosion of entire buildings. Especially in the 1990s, the Las Vegas Strip witnessed many implosions. Even an iconic structure that dared to call itself the "Landmark" was imploded in 1995; landmarks do not exist in context of Strip. And when Hunter S. Thompson revisited Las Vegas at the end of the millennium, a few decades after his *Fear and Loathing Las Vegas*, his initial reaction was fear:

> "The city's frightening now. That's the basis of my reaction to Las Vegas. It's not the city I wrote about. It's not the same place at all. You'll notice that even the - what do you call them? - milestone or trademark casinos are now gone."[9]

And so had become the great resorts of the Strip, like signs and facades were in the 1970s, a form of planned obsolescence. Ironically, the capitalist monuments of the Strip, as some allude to permanence by quoting to classical elements, such as marble Corinthean columns and classical elements, are designed to be imploded. Designers are aware of the limited lifespan of buildings on the Strip, and therefore, many of the seemingly marble columns are really made out of plaster. Although they exude timelessness, they are destined for implosion. Marshall Berman in his reading of Marx had already noted this poignant "innovative self-destruction" inherent in capitalist environments: "The pathos of all monuments is that their material strength and solidity actually count for nothing and carry no weight at all, that they are blown away like frail reeds by the very forces of capitalist development that they celebrate. Even the most beautiful and impressive buildings are disposable and planned to be obsolete, closer in their social functions to tents and encampments that to 'Eqyptian pyramids, Roman Aqueducts, or Gothic cathedrals',"[10] wrote Berman, referring to the great miracles built in Paris of the 19th century. The Las Vegas Strip fits in this tradition of innovative self-destruction, with the difference that it had accelerated the rate of obsolescence.

Walter Benjamin makes a similar argument. "The development of the forces of production reduced the wish symbols of the previous century to rubble even before the monuments representing them had crumbled," he wrote. Ironically, the monuments to the forces of production are destroyed by the same forces that they celebrate. But, this permanent destruction and ruination in capitalist environments is concealed through the "commodity fetish", a concept he borrowed from Marx. Fetishism refers to the human habit of attributing magical and mystical qualities to things, much like fetish objects were revered in primitive society. The problem with the commodity fetish is that its spectral surface qualities mask the "real" nature of production. Likewise, the capitalist city, according to Benjamin, causes a dream state that obscures the "real" nature of commodity production and produces a false consciousness of time.

It is this false consciousness of time that allows for the "hellish" repetition of the past as new. Novelty, for Benjamin, is nothing more than the return of the old that presents itself as new. For instance, fashion becomes unfashionable when it is common and no longer elite. But as soon as a certain fashion has been forgotten, it can return, appearing as new.

So while commodities suggest impermanence, progress, and novelty, they are really also destruction and death: "Fashion: Mr Death! Mr. Death!" wrote Benjamin. As such, Benjamin sees history not as “progress”, but rather as permanent destruction and ruination.

Benjamin attempted to dispel the commodity fetish by offering a counter narrative. This is why Benjamin paid close attention to the afterlife of objects. Rather than dismissing the commodity altogether, Benjamin studied their lifecycle. For Benjamin, commodities reveal their essence at the moment that they are discarded or lose their value. The same goes for buildings. The nausea of the outdated place, evident of the symbolic destruction, potentially dispels the myth. Benjamin used the “dialectical image” as a method to highlight the commodities afterlife. Such an image, contains “the lightning flash of truth”, unveiling the dream image of humanity. These dialectical images are not spontaneously constructed; they are made, according to Susan Buck-Morrs’s analysis in *Dialectics of Seeing,* according to “'the cognitive principles of montage”. Montage allows one to establish “dialectical thinking” through relationships. A technique that he borrowed from the Surrealists, montage is a juxtaposition of two separate images to make a new image with meanings that disrupt time. When an object is taken out of its historical continuum, its dream image is confronted with its afterlife.

Potentially one such a dialectical image, with a little help, is Beckmann’s “Renewal”. It is in this moment, when the Dunes is on the verge of its collapse –the resort that once epitomized all that was modern – that the modern reveals itself as ruin. At the same time, by pasting the Dunes in a classical scene, the timelessness of destruction and renewal on the Las Vegas Strip, as the only constant behind the evolution of the Strip, is revealed. Furthermore, the original painting depicts the Annual Girandola, a yearly Easter fireworks festival in Rome. It implies a cyclical progression of history and, in particular, of destruction, as the sinister side of the celebration as implosion. As if the Dunes implosion, presented in Las Vegas as new and most spectacular, is really business as usual. All the painting needs to become such an image is another caption; such as “Truth Content of the Casino” or “Recurring Ruination of Las Vegas”.

Ruins in Las Vegas don’t last very long. Buildings are immediately imploded, and the remaining rubble discarded. The Strip is like a black hole that absorbs symbols; it is constantly de- and re-territorialized. New visions of the future grow old as fast as they are built, because through the constant implosions and violent destruction on the Strip, the old can resurface as new again. Implosions make novelty possible; people forget when things that were previously there, are no more. This is why it is impossible to think of Las Vegas solely in terms of space; space in Las Vegas suffers from amnesia. In order to understand Las Vegas, we need to think of time; fast forward time.

The Las Vegas Strip is a cemetery of past visions of the future.

Image 2: The ‘Model’ City

Beckmann’s “City Planner” is based on Nicolas Poussin’s “John on the Island of Patmos”, 1640. [See Image 2] Poussin’s painting depicts St. John in exile, writing down the prophecy of the Apocolypse that was handed down from God in the Book of

Revelations. Where Poussin had Hadrian's tomb in the back and an Egyptian Obelisk, Beckmann pasted in part of the Las Vegas Strip. Most distinguishable is Paris Las Vegas, which has a two-thirds replica of the Eiffel tower. By naming the painting "City Planner", it seems as if the lying figure in the foreground is carefully planning the Strip as a vision from above or drawing it as a revelation for other cities, taking the Strip as a glass bowl or barometer that tells the future. The same ruins of antiquity that Poussin painted to depict the fall of Pagan ideals of Roman world, now seem to embody the traditional or classic planning theories, shattered by the new vision of the Strip. If anything, "City Planner" depicts Las Vegas as a prophetic vision from above, perhaps even a model for other cities. This is striking, because Las Vegas has often been painted as a deviant "hypercity", very different from other cities, an exceptional city, a gambling city, a planner's nightmare, an accident that occurred by a lack of city planning and government regulation, a Sodom and Gomorra, a city that was founded by the mafia, a city for outcasts, and an empire built on sand. Beckmann's religious reference seems ironic in the context of Las Vegas, often labeled as Sin City.

However, Las Vegas is less absurd than we would like to admit. One does not even have to leave the Strip to realize that Las Vegas is not a city of extremes or just a random geographical incident. Rather, it is a logical city, shaped by a set of structures, government, and key interests. Moreover, Las Vegas fits in a discussion of other cities, being affected by the same forces as Las Vegas is. Las Vegas has been taken as a theoretical model: a paradigmatic, postmodern, and neoliberal city. In addition, it has become a planning model for cities to be mimicked, for better or worse. Since Las Vegas has been the avatar of pro growth, the first new American metropolis of the 20th century, and the most visited place on earth, it has attracted the envy and interest of other cities. It was no coincidence that Las Vegas was the site of the 100th Conference of the American Planning Association in 2008. In 1999, Las Vegas exceeded Mecca as the most visited place on earth, and the Strip is now one of the most famous streets in the world, on par with the Champs Elysees, Las Ramblas, Broadway, and Bund. Las Vegas growth has not gone unnoticed, and other cities are mimicking Las Vegas. Finally, besides the Las Vegas Strip being a theoretical model, a planning model, it is can also be interpreted as an actual "model", characterized by a malleable movie set type of architecture, with each resort planned for obsolescence.

By dismissing Las Vegas as an exceptional city, an accident, it is no threat to us. However, by positing it as a logical, maybe even "model" city, whether a theoretical model or planning model, some might be disconcerted. It forces us to understand the key structures and interests that have produced it, which are at play in other cities also. It makes the case of Las Vegas all the more relevant. Perhaps the city is more telling of the current state of affairs in cities then we admit to. And indeed, some, for instance, Venturi, Findlay, and Gottdiener, have considered Las Vegas already as a pioneer of national trends.[11]

This dissertation does not treat Las Vegas as an exceptional city. Rather, it looks for the set of structures and interests that led to the configuration of Las Vegas. Plus, since Las Vegas is less of a deviant, this makes the case of Las Vegas all the more relevant. The city is marked by many of the same economic structures and cultural forces that play out

in other parts of the United States as well. Moreover, I claim that theoretical insights that were recent of Las Vegas and other cities have been integral to the city since its beginning.

The first myth to dispel is that the Las Vegas of today is accidental, founded by the mafia. Rather, modern Las Vegas has been put in place by a deliberate set of state regulations, as well as interventions from the federal government. A whole set of "libertarian" state regulations concerning marriage, divorce, gaming, and taxes became conducive for business in Nevada. These state regulations were set in place by a key interest group. Rich voters in the city of Reno, a lot of them who migrated from northern California, attempted to attract more wealth to the state, mainly drove these amendments. In the late 1930s, constitutional amendments prohibited income, inheritance, and estate taxes, and limited property tax in the state. The state actively marketed itself as such, boasting in 1937, that its inhabitants had "the greatest per capita wealth ($5,985)". [12] In 1931, the minimum residency requirement for out-of-state petitioners was lowered from three months to six weeks, immediately doubling the number of divorces. Still, having a residency requirement was important, since it forced people to live in Nevada for a few weeks to be able to obtain a divorce. Paramount in attracting capital was the unique legalization of gambling in 1931, which brought about Nevada's eventual 45-year country-wide monopoly on legalized gambling. These liberal changes both fit into the libertarian attitudes of the people of the state of Nevada and showed a pro-business and pro-entrepreneurial bias, which Nevada has always had, lacking resources. State regulations became Nevada's main "commodity". They set the foundation for the resort industry.

In addition to the state, the federal government has shaped Las Vegas. At the same time that the state posited as a tax-free heaven, the state did not deny itself federal aid from taxpayer dime. The history of Las Vegas is marked by federal aid, during the times of the New Deal, by building Hoover Dam and supplying the city with cheap electricity and a supply of customers: dam workers. Then, during World War II, it set up a giant magnesium plant, gunnery school, and Air Force base. Moehring calls this the "federal trigger" that set off modern Las Vegas.

The federal government set off, as well as fragmented Las Vegas. A set of large infrastructure in the immediate neighborhood of Las Vegas contributed to Las Vegas' fragmented governmental status. First, the federal government set up a separate city, Boulder City, next to Las Vegas, to house the dam workers. Then, in the face of WWII, the government built a military airport and gunnery school in North Las Vegas, which became another institutional entity. A magnesium factory in a "temporary" town became the administrative region of Henderson. As a result of these federal interventions, as well as Las Vegas' failure to annex its suburbs, Las Vegas is not one city but five competing administrative regions, which include the city of Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, Henderson, Boulder City, and unincorporated Clark County.

The fragmented administrative nature of Las Vegas, combined with the libertarian policies, has encouraged mega growth of the metropolitan region, as well as the Strip. The Las Vegas Strip lies outside of Las Vegas city limits, within unincorporated Clark

County. It is governed by the county and not by the city, which helps resort developers in terms of not paying city taxes, while, at the same time, reducing citizen interference. It is hard to fight city hall when there is no city hall. And even city hall is closely allied to industry interests. For instance, Oscar Goodman, the current Las Vegas mayor, even though he has no say over the Strip, takes every opportunity to forward his support of the Strip industry, which should be no surprise, since he was once a lawyer to the mafia. As such, he even played himself in Scorcese's *Casino* (1995).

The fragmented administrative nature and the lack of taxation forced the administrative entities to compete for new development, in order to bring in tax money. "City and especially county planning was designed to promote development with a minimal amount of government interference," writes Moehring. "As a result, 'in-filling' was not required and zoning variances were common. … The policy only promoted leapfrog growth." This type of development ate away land and made it expensive to expand infrastructure as well as utilities. Development occurred rapidly, and since desert land is cheap, many workers came to Las Vegas, attracted both by the service jobs in the resort industry, the low taxes, and the single-family homes that were still affordable on cheap desert land.

However, it is obvious that unincorporation and fragmented government have skewed towards the private sector. "This is a political geography diabolically conceived to separate tax resources from regional social needs. Huge, sprawling, county electoral districts weaken the power of minorities and working-class voters. Un-incorporation, conversely, centralizes land-use decision making in the hands of an invisible government of gaming corporations and giant residential and commercial-strip developers,"[13] said Davis of Las Vegas. Master plans, land-use regulations, and planning commissions have been complicit in granting the private sector power at the cost of broader public benefit, despite the corporations' complaints about over-regulating. Everything in Las Vegas is planned "unplanning".

Although they appear to be two sides of the same coin, the extent to which residents suffer from the casino industry on the Strip is under debate. Findlay claimed that "development of the city was keyed primarily to the interests of tourist and the resort industry rather than the needs of permanent residents",[14] judged from the lack of housing, surface streets, and schools. Moehring claimed that the low social spending mirrored other Sunbelt cities and that "all fast-growing cities face unavoidable lags in infrastructural development."[15] However, one cannot fail to see the massive tax breaks of corporations on one hand and large amounts of tax money spent on city marketing on the other, while the city suffers from a chronic lack of funding for education, social services, public space, and mass transportation.

The extremities in wealth on the Strip contrast with the desolate poverty in its immediate surroundings. Las Vegas is a Janus-faced economic geography. Immediately underneath the pleasure palaces of the Las Vegas Strip lay the storm drains, which are inhabited by homeless, many of whom are suffering from gambling-related pathologies. Some are "silver miners", scavenging the Strip for credits left on slot machines, when they are not harassed by the police. Pawnshops, drug gangs, and crack-addicted street prostitutes

operate less than a block away from the Strip. Las Vegas is leading the nation in terms of homelessness, obesity, poverty, and teen abortions.

As such, the city has had all the characteristics of what has been coined as "neoliberal". The term has only a few times been put in relationship to Las Vegas.[16] Neoliberalism was initially a fiscal policy that forced austerity, as a counterpart to Keynesianism. Put in place since the Reagan and Thatcher rule, it limited social spending and state regulations in exchange for market freedom. Since the 1980s, similar policies were being applied to cities. The neoliberal program finds itself in deregulation and privatization, which now characterizes many cities. Another effect is "urban entrepreneurialism", the shift in focus of cities from providing services to the local population to the attempt to attract economic development. According to Harvey, neoliberalism was more redistributive than it was generative, and increased income inequalities.[17] Davis and Monk also recognize a "spatial logic of neoliberalism", which "revives the most extreme colonial patterns of residential segregation and zoned consumption."[18] These are "evil paradises", gated enclaves that "enflame desires – for unlimited consumption, total social exclusion and physical security, and architectural monumentality".[19]

Las Vegas defies terminology of neoliberalism. In a way, it has always been neoliberal, an early version of an "entrepreneurial city". Unincorporation placed power in the private sector, while limiting government interference, plus separating the city's most important fiscal assets – the convention center, the university international airport, and, above all, the Strip – from where services are needed. Las Vegas perhaps started as a Keynesian city, benefitting from government support, but it has come to represent the avatar of pro-growth policies, especially during the 1990s when it was the fastest growing American metropolis. Yet, especially in light of the current crisis, trickle-down effects have been few; its current social problems are typical of the corrosion of the Keynesian welfare state. At the same time, the Las Vegas Metropolitan area is dotted with secluded resorts and gated communities, as an example of the enclave urbanism that is so common today.

Above all, Las Vegas has been most known as the quintessential postmodern city. In literature, it is theorized as a postmodern form first, until it achieves a complete postmodernity: a city characterized by urban fragmentation, ethnic diversity, global capital flows, environmental terrorism, and surveillance and control.

Las Vegas was considered a postmodern form, largely due to Venturi, Scott-Brown, and Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas*, published in 1972. Inspired by Tom Wolfe, they studied the architecture of Las Vegas as a "Pop City", a cultural expression of the prole that could be used to revive symbolism in architecture, which was something, they claimed, that modernist architecture was lacking. Their seminal work has been considered a manifesto that that catapulted Las Vegas to the forefront of the discussion of postmodernism of architecture. They were interested in the architecture of the Strip particularly as a semiotic system, in which the post-structural gap between the symbolism and the architecture was a potential inspiration for a new type of architecture typology that they called the "decorated shed". The resort architecture of the Las Vegas Strip was seen as the iconoclast that would bring down modernism and a relief from the cultural forms of the status quo. Finally, even following Lyotard's definition of the postmodern,

the Las Vegas Strip can be considered a postmodern form. It appears almost a literal definition, in which the different themes of resorts along the Strip represent the end of a modernist metanarrative.

When Venturi et al. visited Las Vegas in 1968, the city was still relatively small. The Las Vegas Metropolitan region counted roughly a quarter million residents. But as the city grew, Las Vegas would become what people interpreted as a full-fledged city of postmodernity.

The fragmented and polycentric nature of Las Vegas' physical organization has been seen as typical of a postmodern city. It is a radical departure from the concentric Chicago style city, which is considered modern. Michael Dear, a representative of the Los Angeles school of urban theory, refers to the city in *Postmodern Urbanism.* "Conventional city form, Chicago-style, is sacrificed in favor of a noncontiguous collage of parcelized, consumption-oriented landscapes devoid of conventional centers yet wired into electronic propinquity and nominally unified by the mythologies of the disinformation superhighway. Los Angeles may be a mature form of this postmodern metropolis; Las Vegas comes to mind as a youthful example."[20] Davis, in his book *Dead Cities,* also calls Las Vegas an extreme case of a post-urban city, where traditional central-place functions - such as culture and sports, government, high-end shopping, and corporate administration - are radically dispersed among different centers. All that remains in the center is tourism and poverty.[21] In addition, for Davis Las Vegas is a city marked by ecological disaster and "environmental terrorism".[22]

A similar argument is made by Gottdiener in *Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All-American City,* in which he situates Las Vegas as the new "paradigmatic" city, a typical American city from an urban sociological point of view, a "true exemplar of the particular cultural forces that LA Schoolers have in mind".[23] Like other cities in the United States, its urban area is multi-centered and fragmented, and it is characterized by uneven development. However, Beauregard critiques Gottdiener of assigning paradigmatic status to Las Vegas, while, at the same time, constantly using superlatives to describe the city.[24] Therefore, instead of considering the city as paradigmatic, it would be better to consider Las Vegas as an early model, an archetype. The history of Las Vegas has been characterized by urban fragmentation, ever since the federal government built Boulder City in 1929.

Las Vegas postmodern demographic status is more recent however, which manifests itself in the increased ethnic diversity within the city and the transient population. Davis noted how in Las Vegas Latinos outnumber blacks, and they were projected to become the largest community within a decade[25], while Gottdiener sees a growing Asian population.

The city can also considered postmodern in its core-periphery reversal. The Strip, initially a suburban development, takes over as the center of the city from the original downtown already in the mid 1950s. Even today, the relationship between the Strip and the metropolitan region of Las Vegas can be best described as core–periphery. Although the Strip started as a periphery, it became a core, extracting resources from the region, in

terms of labor, water, electricity, food, and building materials. This relationship is quite graphically visible to anyone arriving by plane into the city. The upward vertical growth of the Las Vegas Strip is accompanied by the horizontal sprawl of the Las Vegas metropolitan area through the geometry of the grid, erasing all natural and historic elements in the landscape. Even desert mountain ranges no longer limit the city's growth, as they are slowly carved away by suburban lots. The physical relationship between the Strip and the suburbs can be explained by the fact that for every new hotel room, about two new jobs are created. And with the single family home still being the American ideal way of living, each hotel room equates to a cookie-cutter single-family bungalow. As a consequence, the city literally moves up to the center of capital on the Strip, where land is expensive and the gaming industry is concentrated, and spreads out in the periphery where land is cheap and workers live.

Many, especially Baudrillard, Begout, and Radke, have considered the Las Vegas Strip a postmodern space in that it is marked by simulation, surveillance, and control.[26] They consider the advertising environments on the Strip and its replica architecture a simulation of reality, a "hyperreality", a fake city. Moreover, the blurring between inside and outside, night and day, adds to the simulated nature of reality and the constant disorientation, which, they claim, disciplines people. Moreover, the people movers, one-way mirrors, CCTV surveillance, and the large amount of private security, make the Strip a typical carceral geography, in which people are subjected to an invisible authority.

Las Vegas' reliance on a tourist economy has been considered postmodern as well. For instance, Rothman saw Las Vegas as a shining example in a Post-Fordist economy, a paradigmatic postindustrial city, shrewd in the selling of the ultimate virtual commodity: experience.[27] In a way, Las Vegas has been Post-Fordist for 80 years now, ever since it started to cater to tourists in the 1930s. However, the recent economic crisis has shown how volatile an economy can be that relies on tourism. Yet, it is particularly in this terrain which has given Las vegas the status as a of a planning model. Currently, Macau, Singapore, Vietnam, Korea, and Philippines are going forward with building resorts, taking Las Vegas as an example. Therefore, Nevada has a tourism office in China, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, has a satellite campus in Singapore. And many of these developments appropriate the images of Las Vegas resorts, overtly quoting from the Strip. Whether a copy of the Venetian in Macau, the Shenzhen Window of the World, or a luxury apartment called Bellagio; they all remind us that Las Vegas exists as a powerful model. Even in my own experience as an architect, working on the design of a television tower in Guangzhou, China, the clients aspired to Vegas; they wanted Stratosphere-like thrill rides on the observation deck.

Finally, Las Vegas can also be considered postmodern *avant la lettre* because of its early focus on symbolic capital. According to Baudrillard, sign value dominates in current postmodern culture. The thriving of symbols in space, the consumerist nature of its landscape, and the sign wars between resorts, are figuratively and literally signs of the postmodern. Chaplin and Holdin consider Las Vegas "post-urban" [28] in that it is highly self-conscious about its image. And indeed, many cities today are engaged in exercises to "fix" their image. But above all, I claim, that the increased turnover in the built

environment makes the Las Vegas Strip postmodern. Las Vegas is also an actual "model" city. The Strip is characterized by a movie set type of architecture that is constantly under change, since capital accumulation works through the destruction of symbolic capital of existing resorts. Because of this, Las Vegas has been reflective of trends that happen elsewhere as well. It has co-opted the symbols of contemporary mass and elite culture in order to signify status.

Taking a cross section over the Las Vegas Strip would reveal a history of American culture.

Image 3: Decamping the Deluge of Spectacle

The most dramatic of the "Vegas Vanitas" series is Beckman's "The Hundred Year Flood". [See Image 3] It is based on Nicolas Poussin's "Winter" from his series "The Four Seasons", 1660 –1664. Beckmann knew well which painting to base his montage on; "Winter" has been regarded as the finest historical landscape ever painted. In the series, Poussin connected the seasons to biblical scenes; the winter was married to the deluge, as a way to dramatically represent the end of the world and human civilization. A serpent, gliding over rocks in foreground, adds to the apocalyptic and nightmarish vision, while Noah's ark in the back provides a tiny hope of the new to come. Beckmann, by pasting the Luxor Las Vegas in the painting, portrays Las Vegas as the end of human civilization, and particularly the Luxor, as the epicenter of corruption and evil. As if the Las Vegas adaptation of Sphinx, the ultimate simulacrum, was a fake that pretended to be better than the real, was Las Vegas' eternal sin. Co-opting a form from a mausoleum, dedicated to a Pharaoh King, and to sacrilege it with a laser beam shooting into the sky, surely was pure hubris about to summon the fury of the gods, who would rid Earth of wickedness and corruption, once and for all.

Unlike the original painting, Beckmann also added a mixture of Roman and Aztecan ruins to the foreground, which seems to represent a long abandoned civilization. At the same time, the Luxor looks like a recent vision of the future, its strong shaft of light shining into the sky, yet about to be abandoned. Many visions of the future have surfaced and been discarded on the Strip, with fervor, in a compulsion for metamorphosis that seems pathological. Architectural paradigms are shed as soon as they come about, immediately re-theorized for something new. As fast as the Luxor Las Vegas simulacrum was glorified as a model, it was despised, chastised as "spectacle", abandoned for a new paradigm. Moreover, the new models were theorized in such a way that devalued the previous ones. Underneath the metamorphoses on the Las Vegas Strip, lies a management of taste, produced by the gaming industry and, only recently, by elite architects. Their theoretical decampments is a constant in the history of the Las Vegas Strip, complicit in the production of symbolic difference, through the realm of culture and taste, as a way to encourage capital accumulation. They produced and disseminated knowledge, "truths" of the design of resorts, whether informally or through trade journals and conferences. The reformation of this knowledge achieves the devaluation of symbolic capital of existing resorts. Resorts can compete with one another within a paradigm, by upping the language or co-opting forms or by overthrowing the paradigm in its entirety and introducing a new

"truth", which dramatically reduces the value of the previous resorts. Therefore, each new paradigm typically reacts to and critiques the preceding. So, a better name for the painting is "Decamping the Deluge of Spectacle". The Las Vegas Strip inundates manifestos – whether "high" or "low" theory – as soon as they are formulated.

This dissertation attempts to unravel the different theoretical framings of Las Vegas, and, specifically, how they help us understand Las Vegas and how they create a space for architectural practice. It distinguishes between "low" and "high" theory; the paradigms that are embraced by the industry versus the ones by elite architects. These are separate, theoretical narratives that have only converged a few times in the history of the Las Vegas Strip. However, their theoretical decampments teach us something about the physical changes of the Strip, and they enable us to understand some of the specifics of the architectural models that have been deployed.

At the same time, this dissertation engages with the theoretical tool of "spectacle", as an entry point into the history and reconfiguration of the Las Vegas Strip as a whole. Although I am sympathetic with the Debordean notion of spectacle, I seek to come to a new understanding of spectacle, informed by the case of Las Vegas. Different from Debord, I do not wish to dismiss the realm of cultural production, but I seek to unpack the different actors involved in the production of "spectacle", whether in built form or in discourse, and the way in which it has played a part in the history of the Strip.

This project is thus a type of historicization that includes history as much as theory. In this, lies the main contribution of this dissertation. By historicizing the "spectacle" of the Las Vegas Strip, this dissertation attempts to fill the gap between theories of spectacle that are low on the specifics of history and the histories of Las Vegas that are low on theory. History is used as a way to inform theories of symbolic capital, and spectacle is used as a way to understand the cultural production and lifecycle of signs, architecture, and urbanism, and the way in which the nature of "spectacle" changes over time, under different conditions. Theory, on the other hand, allows generalization from the singular case of the Las Vegas Strip to other places, in addition to linking Las Vegas to processes that happen elsewhere. Therefore, this project is a form of grounded theory; it has been informed through the methods of archival research, interviews, discourse analysis, and theorization. I have gone through promotional material, blueprints, casino industry literature, relevant oral histories, and newspaper microfilms, particularly from the archives of the Special Collections at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and the Nevada State Museum and Historical Society. In addition, I have interviewed historians, resort architects, interior designers, resort operators, and city planners.

The historicization of Las Vegas ultimately led me to formulate the following analytical themes, which relate the Las Vegas Strip to processes that go on elsewhere: suburbanization, corporatization, Disneyfication, and global branding. They explain the different successive forms of the fetish: Wild West, Los Angeles Cool, Pop City, Corporate Modern, Disneyland, Sim City, and Starchitecture. This historicization contributes to a more rigorous, multilayered analysis of the Las Vegas Strip as well as spectacle. At same time, it reveals the constant factors in the cultural production of the Las Vegas Strip, for instance its relationship with the movie industry, the symbolic

destruction, the social organization of experience, and themes of nature, the orient, the city, history, and the future. Without an historical investigation, these aspects could have been considered as belonging to a single moment; when, in reality, they have been integral to the Las Vegas Strip since its inception.

Before I move forward to introduce this project, a brief account on the notion of spectacle is overdue. The concept of spectacle is best known from the work of Guy Debord and the Situationist International. They try to invigorate the Marxian project under new historical post-War conditions, such as the mass media and consumer society. Debord understands spectacle as a totality, not just as an event; he claims we are currently living in the "society of the spectacle". It is a material, cultural, and social condition in which everyday experience is increasingly shaped by images that circulate through the electronic media, advertising, television, and other cultural industries.

The Situationist build heavily on the Marxist concept of reification and commodity fetishism, not used since except by George Lukacs and Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry. However, they take the idea of commodity fetishism one step further, by applying it to society as a whole. According to Debord, the commodity has developed in such a way that it is barely recognizable as such: it has become a spectacle. Departing from Marx, he claims that it is no longer physical commodities, but images, that mediate the social relationship between people. If Marx understood capitalism as an immense accumulation of commodities, then late capitalism has to be conceptualized as an immense accumulation of spectacles. The world of things is now a world of images of things in which everything has moved into representation. Debord claims that capitalism thus has succeeded in creating a new form of alienation and oppression; a reality that is lived by proxy: "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation." (Debord 1995, 12) [29] The society of the spectacle renders invisible the operational mechanisms of capitalism and its histories. In the city of spectacle, space and time are increasingly homogenized, organized, and controlled. As such, it is wholly alienating and implies passivity on behalf of the spectator. Spectacle is really a theory of false consciousness.

According to Debord, urban planning is complicit in turning the natural and human environment into a spectacle, which further alienates by perfectly "separating" dreamworlds of consumption with "real" conditions of production. Debord's formulation of spectacle was specifically a critique of the urban conditions of post-War Paris, from which *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) originated.[30] He critiqued the advent of the car, the factories, tourist developments, cultural centers, and holiday camps, which, he claimed, achieved a concrete separation and alienation. For instance, the construction of the "banlieus" enforced the consumption of domestic appliances, while the social housing projects caused segregation and social control. The gentrification and museumification of Paris' historical quarters subjected their vitality to a consumable image. The construction of the "peripherique" forced the city to be experienced through the commodity of the car, limiting the experience of the city in purely visual terms. This, says Debord, is deliberate, since spectacle elevates "the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived…"[31]

More generally, the term spectacle covers a wide variety of phenomena in specific historical moments. Spectacle has existed ever since the beginning of recorded history, however pre-modern spectacle was mainly in the form of a festival.[32] Spectacle plays an important role in the creation and expression of collective identity; societies define themselves through spectacles, and they are often manifestations of power. The Roman Empire built the Coliseum, the papacy Saint Peters Square, and Napoleon III let Haussmann built Parisian boulevards. Debord had also differentiated between the spectacle of political religion, the "concentrated spectacle", and capitalist spectacle, "the diffuse spectacle". Whereas the concentrated spectacle mainly refers to totalitarian regimes, Debord traces the diffuse spectacle back to spectacle of marketplace. Its origins lie in Paris of the 19th century, when capitalism organized society around images of commodity. In places such as the world exhibitions and shopping malls, such as the Parisian Arcades, commodities were put on display, exuding images of luxury and happiness. These are the places Walter Benjamin, half a century before Debord, theorized as "phantasmagoria", dreamworlds, and sites of the fetish. "World exhibitions were places of pilgrimage to the fetish commodity."[33]

After 19th century Paris, the epicenter of capitalist spectacle shifted to the United States. During the early 20th century, advertising and consumerism gained in importance, until the depression and WWII temporarily interrupted it. After the war, radio, television, and movies further promoted consumerist lifestyles. In addition, suburbanization and shopping malls surfaced as urban forms across the landscape, further stimulating the consumption of commodities. This is the same time that the Las Vegas Strip emerges. And in the 1960s, the same forces play out in Paris, the moment when Debord theorizes spectacle. Debord's notion of spectacle is therefore historically relevant to the Las Vegas Strip, with the difference that the urban changes of Paris were manly state led, while the private industry developed the Las Vegas Strip.

And today, Debord's notion of spectacle seems more relevant than ever. In his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), Debord later recognized that with the rise of the global media and surveillance, spectacle had evolved by combining aspects of the capitalist and totalitarian spectacle into an "integrated spectacle", an even more pervasive form of the society of the spectacle.[34] In this dissertation, I would like to renew the notion of spectacle as a framework to understand cities. Like Debord predicted, cities now, more than ever, are shaped by the logic of image. Today, more and more cities are being modeled around spectacle. Cities, in entrepreneurial fashion,[35] increasingly stage events, set up publicity campaigns, and participate in building ever larger and more iconic projects that potentially cause a "Bilbao Effect" – the transformative effect named after the way in which the iconic Guggenheim museum, designed by Frank Gehry, put Bilbao on the tourist map. Rather than providing services, cities attempt to promote a marketable image, designed by architects who are complicit in supplying images in the media saturated symbolic economy. Cities have turned into an ontological subject, self-consciously aware of their image. Of all those cities, the spectacular city *par excellence*, is Las Vegas. And like Las Vegas resorts on the Strip, cities around the world are stuck in a race of images.

However, although spectacle enables us to understand cities today, and in particular Las Vegas, I seek to take a different methodological approach. Fundamentally, Marxist criticism of spectacle is an ideology critique of these spaces, premised on a base-superstructure analysis, unresponsive to specific historical conditions.[36] Moreover, at the heart of the Marxist critique of spectacle lays the assumption that the realm of representation is somehow detached from the "real" and that symbols achieve a false consciousness. However, symbols have been a part of everyday life from the earliest of history. Moreover, relationships are forged through the realms of the symbolic.[37]

Debord's work has already cast long shadows on cultural and architectural theory, and also on interpretations of Las Vegas. It has influenced a strand of literature that particularly rejects the spectacular architecture of the Strip as "hyperreality", for instance by Baudrillard and Begout.[38] But, like Debord, their work is typical in its top down cultural decoding that pays little attention to the actors and processes involved in the production of spectacle. As an architect and urban designer, I do not wish to immediately dismiss the realms of cultural production, and I also appreciate the value and innovativity of the architectural styles, the typologies, and technological experimentation that occurred on Strip, which have also contributed to the experience of the public realm, the Las Vegas Strip. Tom Wolfe, Reyner Banham, Archigram, and, most notably, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown had already appreciated the value of the architecture of the Strip. In addition, AlSayyad has shown how a conceived "fake" space on the Las Vegas Strip can be just as "real" as any other place, providing for a range of public activities.[39] Fox illustrated how "Las Vegas has uniquely blurred the role of for-profit and not-for-profit entities"[40] in the presentation of art, animals, and sex, making public that what was previously on private display. It would be too easy to dismiss Las Vegas. And even Beckmann's "The Hundred Year Flood", was a gift to the Las Vegas Art Museum by Glenn Schaeffer, one of the gaming industry's CEO's. Although being a social critic *and* architect perhaps gives me a privileged position in understanding the cultural production of the Strip, it also adds to the difficulty of having to straddle these two positions, which are hard, if not impossible, to reconcile.

Both the topic and fieldwork of this dissertation were subject to limitations. First of all, in order to finish this project in a timely fashion, I had to limit its scope. This dissertation was not written to seek practical planning solutions for Las Vegas. Las Vegas is a city marked by sprawl, traffic jams, disintegrating roads, environmental degradation, and a scarcity of parks and sidewalks. Particularly, in light of the current economic instability, this model needs to be critically re-evaluated. A city that bases its economy entirely on tourism has to deal with the volatility of the economy, and in times of recession, this has potentially devastating effects. Moreover, the constant imaging and re-imaging of the city wastes resources that could otherwise be spent on solving real infrastructural problems or providing public needs. With the focus on image, real urban problems, including lack of education, infrastructure, parks, etc. can be placed on the bottom shelf, or even just put out of sight, unable to damage the image. However, from my research on both the gaming industry and the planning officials, it appears that these are, above all, political problems. County planners know well how to make their city more pleasant for the local population. They have proposed Bus Rapid Transport systems on the Strip that could feed into

residential communities where workers live, in addition to transport-oriented developments, infill developments, neighborhood parks, side streets to resorts that no longer cut into Strip sidewalks, and economic diversification. However, gaming industry interests easily prevail in a context of fragmented government, unincoporation, powerful gaming lobbies, a limited tax base, and the absence of a city hall. *Thou Shall Not Feed Homeless in the Park* – is one of the more recent unique Las Vegas ordinances.[41]

But the biggest limitation of all is that this project is solely about "Vegas", the Strip – not "Las Vegas", the city. In addition, this dissertation only deals with the major resorts on the Las Vegas Strip. The new resorts and renovations that represented transitional moments were discussed in more detail than others. I did not discuss the smaller properties on the Strip, nor did I discuss the resorts outside of the Strip. In addition, I did not fully investigate the back-of-house operations of resorts on the Strip, which is potentially rich material for ethnography.

Another limitation lies in the fieldwork and the way in which the nature of the gaming industry plays into the difficulty of doing research. First of all, the archives contain little information on the early resorts. This demonstrates that, initially, there was little interest in the Strip or in its designers. For instance, it is striking that so little is known about the architect Martin Stern, who designed many of the Strip's resorts. When the gaming industry matured, trade magazines were founded that catered to resort designers specifically. As a result, the nature of the evidence used in the dissertation varies over time. To cover the Strip in the early years, I have depended largely on newspaper articles and publicity material, whereas for the Strip's later years, I could rely on trade magazines with extensive features on resorts and interviews with designers. Then, the secrecy of the gaming industry makes it hard to thoroughly investigate current resorts on the Strip or to interview resort designers, operators, and developers. Finally, many of the resorts I write about no longer exist in their original forms, or they have been imploded. Since the Las Vegas Strip is marked by destruction, most of the early resorts were razed a long time ago, making it impossible to fully investigate their architectural qualities or layout. The rapid turnover of the built environment makes it hard to do history, and, very often, it is not history, but myth, that prevails.

In short, the title of this dissertation, "The Strip", refers to a noun and verb, both a topic and a method. Instead of totalizing spectacle, it attempts to uncover specific layers: the actors, elements, and discourse involved in the cultural production of the Las Vegas Strip. Moreover, the Strip means different things for different disciplines. This project attempts to deal with the Strip from multiple disciplinary angles. For a city planner, it is an urban form that organizes a city; for a geographer, it is an interface for interactions between humans and their environment; for an architect, it is a physical site that organizes architectural program and symbolism. The Strip is as much a mental construction as it is an actual place.

The dissertation is structured as followed. Chapters have been separated by a specific time period: by building booms. Historically, there are periodic waves of new casino resort constructions with continuous upgrades and renovation projects in between. A total of four building booms can be counted. Each boom, I claim, has a different nature. A

building boom either coincides with one paradigm, or witnesses a paradigm shift halfway. Each chapter highlights several transition moments – speculative moments of opportunity or crisis – in which spectacle gets reconfigured. Even though the dissertation presents a history of spectacular urbanism, it conceives of each of these transition moments as continuous with others, influencing the "historical present".[42]

During the first building boom on the Las Vegas Strip, a dusty little road suburbanized into a neon vernacular landscape of low-rise, solipsistic casino resorts. By the end of the boom, the Strip – in a classic case of a postmodern reversal of core and periphery – had taken over downtown Las Vegas as the new suburban center of the city. I claim that the Strip managed to take over downtown precisely because of its suburbanization and by turning its suburbanization into a spectacle. First, suburbanization was used an effective technology of separation and isolation of people beneficial to the gambling industry. Secondly, at a time when suburbanization was a phenomenon that occurred across the United States, the suburban form thzt gambling took on the Strip provided better images to disseminate. In other words, the spectacle of the suburban Strip had dominated downtown because of the things it managed to keep out of and in sight.

During the second Las Vegas building boom, the Strip morphed stylistically from pop to modern, and typologically from low-rise bungalow to high-rise megaresort. At the start of the boom, tall eccentric neon signage defined much of the experience; the architecture lied subdued. By the end of the boom, architecture had struck back with a vengeance, and massive megaresorts, fronted by a sea of whiteboard corporate logos, now defined the Strip. Underneath this change lay a transformation of the financial structure: from Mafia and Teamster pension funds to corporate financing. Teamster pensions had found a commensurate architectural expression in the spectacle of pop, until corporate financing took over, and the spectacle of corporatism prevailed. The corporate modern aesthetics plus the larger resort plant introduced by the corporations devalued the Pop City casino complexes to provincial and small. After the Strip reached its pinnacle of eccentricity, during the mid 1960s, corporate money led to the demise of the golden age of the sign.

During the third building boom, the Strip transforms from Disneyland to "Sim City". At first, resorts had taken over Disney-like qualities: urban theme park attractions and fantasy architecture had become the new wall of marketing. Halfway the third building boom, there is a shift from architecture based on fantasy to architecture based on simulation; resorts became idealized replicas of other places. By the end of the boom, the Strip had turned into a pedestrian boulevard, filled with free theme park like entertainment, lined up with resorts that symbolized other places, whether imaginary or "real". As a whole, the "Disneyfication" of the Strip during the third building boom coincided with a national trend that assumed that image should become central in a place making strategy in order to attract tourists, and takes a corporate model derived from Walt Disney Company. If at the beginning of the 1990s images were taken from Disney, and resorts represented fantasy, many resorts in the last half of the 1990s referred to Old Europe. Those resorts were replicas of other places; specifically, they evoked places of money, history, and culture, in order to appeal to an older and wealthier crowd, and they demoted the Disney model to cheap and childish. In short, the Strip moved from the

spectacle of fantasy to chic urbanity, from the spectacle of Disney-like fantasy to the spectacle of simulated reality.

During the fourth building boom, the Las Vegas Strip turns into a landscape of "starchitecture", a neologism that is a conjunction of "star" and "architecture". Resorts took a contemporary style of architecture, some of them designed by world famous architects. The concentration of star architects on the Strip was paralleled by the presence of famous interior designers, contemporary artist, and celebrity chefs. By the end of the fourth building boom, the Strip appeared a major hub of elite culture, and it increasingly exported its models globally. At the heart of this shift, lies a process of global branding. At a time when elite architecture takes ever more exuberant shapes and gets appropriated by corporations as part of their global brand identity, so adopts the Strip an architecture that initially mimics, and later actually is, star architecture. The new architecture devalues the previous phase of replicas, by laying a claim on authenticity, as well as on the global stardom of the individual architects. Themed resorts, designed by relatively anonymous architects, were no longer desirable; instead, elite culture – whether art, architecture, or haute cuisine – had become the new fetish and commodity on the Strip.

Each chapter also deals with the cultural production about Las Vegas, specifically the architectural and urban theorists. Elite architectural theory left the Strip completely unaffected, yet allowed us to understand the various phases the Strip had gone through and, more so, architects' changing estimation of the Strip. Throughout its history, the Strip has been theorized in three major contrasting interpretations: "Pop City", "hyperreality", and "brandscape". Initially, architectural theorists were intrigued by the "vernacular" architecture of the Strip, particularly the signage. Las Vegas was theorized and appreciated as "Pop City"; its naïve attempts at representation were considered a popular type of architecture made for and by the prole. The architectural framing allowed them to use images for their own architectural practices. Two cultural critics, Eco and, particularly, Baudrillard, had a different conception of the sign, one that was essentially an ideology critique of capitalism. Not coincidentally, they critiqued the Las Vegas after Venturi had visited the city, when it had already become corporate. They were critical of corporate logos and advertising, which, they claimed, created a condition of "hyperreality": a homogenizing world of floating signifiers from which it is impossible to distinguish the real. As the Strip normalized and appropriated corporate modern aesthetics that existed elsewhere, it was no longer a topic of interest to architectural theorists, nor could its images be used for their designs. The corporate safe style was not dramatic enough to pique their interest, until resorts took on theme-park-like qualities. However, this time cultural theorists and architectural critics alike typically loathed the architecture of the Strip, which they dismissed as "theme park" and "hyperreal", a term they borrowed from Eco and Baudrillard. No longer did they sympathize with the commercial architecture on the Strip; instead, they critiqued it as a landscape of deception shaped by corporate greed. Only when celebrity architects were involved in the production of the Strip did some architectural theorists reevaluate their critical position. They came up with the more ambiguous term "brandscape", a space in which architects potentially subverted and exploited the brand. This theoretical framing, once again, opened a space for their architectural practice. These theoretical decampments show how

theory is also spectacle, which attempts to produce Las Vegas as a unitary structure, specifically for architectural theorists' own individual interests. However, the symbolic destruction on the Las Vegas Strip does not solely apply to resorts – it applies as much to architectural discourse.

The Las Vegas Strip is a black hole for architectural theory.

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Chapter Two: From Wild West to Los Angeles Cool: The Suburbanization of the Strip (1941 – 1963)

2.1 Wild West

2.1.1 The Prefiguration of the Strip

2.1.2 Solipsistic Suburban Archetype

2.1.3 Movie Set Architecture

2.2 Los Angeles Cool

2.2.1 Hollywood Hype

2.2.2 The Strip from Lower Case to Upper Case

2.2.3 The Booming Crisis

2.2.4 Post Boom Diversification

"While all the technical forces of capitalism contribute toward various forms of separation, urbanism provides the material foundation for those forces and prepares the ground for their deployment. It is the very technology of separation*."*[1]

- Guy Debord. Society of the Spectacle, "Thesis 171"

During the first building boom on the Las Vegas Strip, a dusty little road suburbanized into a neon vernacular landscape of low-rise, solipsistic casino resorts. By the end of the boom, the Strip – in a classic case of a postmodern reversal of core and periphery – had taken over downtown Las Vegas as the new suburban center of the city.

I claim that the Strip managed to take over downtown precisely because of its suburbanization and by turning its suburbanization into a spectacle. First, suburbanization was used as an effective technology of separation, beneficial to the gambling industry. Secondly, the suburban form that gambling took on the Strip provided better images to disseminate. In other words, the spectacle of the suburban Strip had dominated downtown because of the things it managed to keep out of and in sight.

Suburbanization was a phenomenon that occurred across the United States, supported by federal housing policies, the building of federal highways, cheap mortgages, and oil.[2] Because of advances in technology, it was no longer necessary to live in downtown. The car made decentralized satellite communities accessible, while electricity from far away power plants had the potential to power them. Moreover, with more land available at a lower cost, middle class families en masse abandoned downtown. The trend started to take off after WWII and continues still today; by 2000, half of all Americans lived in suburbs.[3] Suburban life has become a quintessential aspect of American culture.

Although suburbanization is a term that typically denotes residential growth on the fringes of a city, it applies to a commercial area, such as the Strip, as well. Sure, the suburbanization of casinos on the Strip had different causes and conditions than typical

residential suburbia. However, the principle of suburbanization is the same. Effectively, suburbanization is a *technology of separation*. The suburbanization of the Strip enabled the isolation of people and gambling in resorts. Downtown was abandoned for the Strip, because suburbanization was a better separating system.

By suburbanizing gambling, the casino hotel could evolve into a different type: the casino resort. The casinos that existed in downtown Las Vegas were simple hotels, partly, because there was no space for other facilities on the small downtown lots. The lots available around the Strip were much cheaper and larger. Not restricted by a small downtown grid, they were structured around a transportation corridor.

The casino resort typology more easily isolated individuals from the public sphere of the street and the influence of competing casinos. Confined to resort grounds, with a range of facilities at their convenience, guests would never need to leave the property. The resort type fit well along the Strip, and each resort almost functioned like a miniature city. The Strip rearranges "the specialized neighborhoods of a traditional city, with shopping, business, and residential districts, into a series of mini-cities, each of which contains all these functions – or, due to the town's resort role, their leisure-time equivalent,"[4] writes Alan Hess. But unlike a typical city, there was only one developer behind these "mini-cities", with the power to fashion space in such a way that it could maximize consumption and gambling in particular. Much like the suburbanization of residential areas forced people into the consumption of autos and household equipment, so did the suburbanization of gambling encourage people to consume. Social experience was better organized in favor of gambling through a set of strategies and technologies. Gambling was diffused throughout the property, and even incorporated into bars, pools, and resort lobbies. Scientifically designed Muzak composed a consuming atmosphere. Moreover, everything that did not fit the gambling interface was deliberately kept out of sight: workers and tourists were carefully separated in a back and front of house.

The segregation between tourists and workers operates on the level of the city as well. Because of the large lot sizes of the resort enclaves, very little side streets occurred on the Strip. This made the Strip as a whole isolated from the rest of the city. Tourists were confined to the area of the Strip and, above all, to the individual resort enclaves. The suburbanization of gambling on the Strip resulted in an extreme form of enclave urbanism of the Strip as a whole and of the individual solipsistic suburban resorts in itself.

The suburban enclave was desirable for the gambling industry for another reason as well. It contained gambling from society and kept it out of sight. The suburbanization of gambling was a spatial solution for an activity that was still morally questionable at the time, although many occasionally enjoyed it. By supporting the suburban Strip resorts, middle class suburbanites "forged a containment of gambling that kept it confined to the suburban holiday resorts of the Strip while barring it from the nation's major metropolitan areas,"[5] argues Schwartz. "At the same time, and with no fear of hypocrisy, they patronized the thriving casino resorts of the Strip."[6] Much like American suburbia allowed suburbanites to live comfortably far enough away from the big city, but near enough to be accessible by car, so gambling became located in a suburban containment

from civilization – far enough from schools, yet close enough for adults to escape to. And if residential suburbia kept people away from the influence of corrupting downtown, but close enough to be accessible, the reverse is true for the suburban Strip: the influence of gambling was isolated on the Strip, yet still attainable. The Las Vegas Strip occupied a place between desire and morality.

However, the reasons for the suburbanization of gambling on the Strip are not just utilitarian. Sure, the separation of gambling was an effective containment of an activity considered immoral, plus the suburbanization of the Strip enabled a more controlled social experience conducive to gambling. But, the suburbanization of gambling was also a consequence of a real suburban *desire* among visitors. The Strip resorts built on the desire of a nation that considered suburban living more attractive than urban living. In Europe, in contrast, most casinos were located in urban settings. The rise of the suburban Strip was not a parallel coincidence with the postwar national suburban growth. Because the United States was steering towards suburbanization, on the Strip, gambling was promoted through suburbia. Resorts took suburban forms that were turned into a spectacle: desire for gambling was produced and reproduced through spectacle, the spectacle of suburbia.

Above all, the suburban ideal that existed in American society was based on a middle class perception that saw the quality of life in downtown inferior to the suburb. Through the bombardment of advertising and movies that glorified suburbia, suburban living was assigned status and became desirable. “In the United States, status and income correlate with suburbs,”[7] notes Kenneth Jackson, as one of the major characteristics of suburbia.

A key element in this ideal was the car. The car had become a major status symbol, and a true car-culture was emerging. The nexus of this development lied in Southern California, the home ground of many of the visitors to Las Vegas. They felt more comfortable and at home on the suburban Las Vegas Strip, with its spacious plots and parking facilities, than in crowded downtown. Unlike the downtown gridiron, a strip is the primordial suburban form, a native structure in a society with a strong car culture. A strip, according to Reyner Banham, is “a linear stretched-out automotive downtown, the kind of townmaking that is natural and native to the motor age."[8] The Strip aligned well with the car-culture of its Southern Californian visitors, and as a result, the downtown gridiron plan ceded to the Strip.

Like the status of a typical suburban bungalow lies in specific elements, such as its front door, driveway, lawn, pool, and mailbox, so was the status of a suburban resort defined by some key symbols. Resorts turned typical suburban elements – pools, road signage, parking lots, driveways, and lawns – into a spectacle. The competition between resorts on the Strip led to the growth of these elements, their exaggeration, and their thematic adaptations. It was the eccentricity of these suburban elements, rather than the buildings themselves, that defined the experience of the Strip. This is what got the Strip the attention from cultural and architectural critics, such as Tom Wolfe and Robert Venturi.

The suburbanization of gambling on the Strip thus had architectural consequences: it demanded suburban architecture characterized by eccentric suburban elements, while the

actual buildings were architecturally less distinctive. Venturi classified this type as the "decorated shed". Hess saw the origins of the way in which the resort industry "perfected the presentation of a public face" in its "roadside ancestor, the motel, Strip City's primitive hut."[9] The motel was the tourist equivalent of the suburban bungalow. While the buildings of the resorts were all more or less the same, it was these typical suburban elements that assigned status among resorts. These elements marked difference between resorts that were fundamentally the same. As a result, they were turned into a spectacle. This explains why resorts on the Strip were engaged in a race for who had the most parking lots, the biggest sign, the most elaborate pool, the most lavish landscaping, and the most exotic theme.

The same time resorts competed with these symbols, they sought another's proximity. The contradiction of resorts trying to isolate, while benefitting from another, can be explained through the diffusive nature of spectacle. The competition between resorts led to an environment on the Strip in which the individual symbols produced by resorts disseminated to the Strip as a whole, creating a dynamic environment. For a spectacle to operate, it cannot be confined. Therefore, the arrival of each new resort raises the status of the Strip as a whole. It is no surprise then that each new resort was wished success by existing resorts in the local newspapers.

And while from a traditional geographical perspective human settlement in the desert is undesirable, the suburbanization of the desert brought the resorts a spectacular advantage. Not only did they have more control over image in the context of the desert, they profited from the heightened contrast between the lavish landscaping and the barren desert, which only added to the visual impact. Unlike downtown, the architecture of the Strip was less constrained by local cultural context, which freed up the coupling between the resort industry and popular imagery. Less constraint by local zoning laws, city hall, and citizen's influence, it was easier to refashion space to a controlled gambling décor in desert. Then, the heightened contrast of lavish lawns and neon lights in the desert gave the Strip an unreal look, which added to its appeal.

Once resorts were constructed, the spectacle of the suburban Strip was disseminated through various channels. Resorts distributed images that further glorified suburban vacations. They produced and circulated images of visitors hanging out in pools, sitting on green lawns, driving around in golf carts, and posing with their cars. The postcard industry thrived on these images as well, and burgeoned with the resort industry since their interests aligned.

This chapter analyzes the first building boom on the Strip. Although, fundamentally, resorts were similar during the first building boom – they were typical internalized suburban low-rise structures – from the outside there were obviously two different phases: Wild West and Los Angeles Cool. WWII played a large part in the change between the two, as it put a temporary halt on the consumption society that had started developing in the United States since the 1920s. Since materials were scarce, and the Wild West theme already existed in downtown Las Vegas, it was simply assumed. But after WWII, soldiers returned from exotic places with money in their pockets. This broke the more sober Wild West mold in exchange for a more luxurious Los Angeles Modern

style. A few key themes will be stipulated throughout the shift, which will highlight different aspects of spectacle. These themes recurred then and do still now: the connections with the movie industry; the architecture of replicas and miniatures; signage; the fetish of nature, the orient, and technology; and destruction.

2.1 Wild West

The first phase of the Las Vegas Strip is best described as "Wild West" because of the theme of the first resorts, the frontier spirit of the first entrepreneurs, and the Strip's isolated location and unregulated nature.

The first two resorts on the Strip, El Rancho and the Last Frontier, had a western image. The theme was already associated with Las Vegas, since the city had western roots as a western railroad stop, in addition to having a history of mining and ranching. In 1934, Las Vegas already exploited this heritage when it initiated the Helldorado Rodeo and Parade, and, in 1939, the city marketed itself as "Still a Frontier Town". [See Image 1] At a time when Western movies were immensely popular, Las Vegas happily took advantage of America's fascination and nostalgia for the West. Moreover, western themed places were perceived as unassuming and welcoming by tourists, while enticing a daredevil-like attitude that operators liked to see in their patrons. The spectacle of the West was a way to encourage a type of commensurate social behavior.

At the same time, the Wild West image fitted with the state's unique regulations. "Nevada is a thinly populated State where easy divorce, open prostitution, licensed gambling, and legalized cockfighting are only the more luridly publicized manifestations of a free & easy, individualist spirit, deriving straight from the mining camp and cattle ranch,"[10] noted *Time Magazine* in 1937. Even though it was mainly rich Reno voters that were behind the regulations, many of them from Northern California, the western rhetoric fit the bill perfectly. Nevada's "Otherness" was managed through a profitable conflation of a "Western" libertarian spirit and image.

Operators associated themselves with the frontier image as they were speculating their investment capital in highly risky endeavors, on a relatively undeveloped stretch of land, barren in the desert. The first resort entrepreneurs on the Strip, Thomas Hull and R.E. Griffith, were not afraid to take risks or engage in activities that were considered immoral, knowing that the payoff could be great. Successful entrepreneurs in the hotel and theatre industry, they had surplus capital that they were willing to invest in new ventures. It was highly risky to undertake a resort project at a location away from the Downtown, where there were virtually no developments. Moreover, the gambling industry still carried, even after its legalization, a big stigma. Anyone willing to participate in that business was free to do so in Las Vegas, "an outpost for outcasts".[11]

From a developer's point of view, the Strip was actually an ideal site: a virgin site, virtually uninhibited by zoning or tax restraints. The Strip started just south of city limits, so that operators could escape city taxes, such as an ad valorem property tax, and city zoning laws. At the same time, outside of city limits, developers would only be subject to the less restricted – and, at the time, less subject to corruption – county zoning laws,

rather than those of the city. When Las Vegans attempted to annex the Strip, casino operators responded by successfully establishing the unincorporated township of Paradise City. The lack of regulation had been institutionalized indefinitely. No longer would the city of Las Vegas be able to collect any taxes or regulate the area in any form. It was not city planning, but rather, deliberate “un-planning" that would define the development of the Strip. As a result, the Strip became an example of unfettered capitalist urbanization. Un-planning is also a form of planning: it can be seen as the edification of the market.

2.1.1 The Prefiguration of the Las Vegas Strip

Before the Strip had officially been born, many forces merged to enable its existence. A combination of state regulations, technological advances, and image self-consciousness defined the history of Las Vegas and the prefiguration of the Strip. Although the Strip does not officially lie in the city Las Vegas, it cannot be explained independently from the city from which it grew. Las Vegas was founded as a typical railroad town in the West in 1905, but it quickly became the United States “Other” as a way to attract capital in the desert. This “otherness” was managed through a profitable conflation of a “western” libertarian spirit and image. Despite its geographical disadvantages, Las Vegas managed to grow as a result of state regulations, including liberal marriage, divorce, gambling and taxation laws, federal spending, the advent of the swamp cooler, electricity and the mass media, and Las Vegas’ willingness to adjust its image according to changing circumstances. But its growth was far from steady. As a city characterized by a pro-growth entrepreneurial spirit and a lack of natural resources, Las Vegas has been a “boom and bust city” since its inception. It would radically redefine itself after each economic crisis. These conditions set the stage for the emergence of the Strip.

From a traditional geographical point of view, Las Vegas was far from an ideal place for human settlement. Cut off by the Spring Mountains to the west, the Sheep Mountains to the north, the Muddy Mountains to the east, and the Black Mountains to the south, it lies isolated in the Las Vegas Valley, and it is located hundreds of miles away from major cities. The landscape is sandy, dusty, and rocky, sparsely interspersed with desert vegetation and wildlife. Its arid desert climate is typical of the dry Mojave Desert. Summers are particularly cruel; on most days in July and August the temperature exceeds 100 degrees Fahrenheit, which, combined with a very low humidity of often less than 10 percent, can feel “oven-like”. Very little rain falls in the area; on average there are about 300 days of sunshine a year.[12] However, despite its physical remoteness and high temperatures, – or, more precisely, because of these – new inventions, such as air conditioning, the automobile, and the airplane, allowed Las Vegas to become an ideal resort destination. Mechanically cooled off to more comfortable temperatures and accessible with modern transportation whilst still being remote, Las Vegas’ physical geography offered tourists sun and escapism.

The history of the initial settlement of Las Vegas as we know it dates to the early nineteenth century, when the area functioned as an oasis for explorers crossing the Mojave Desert. In 1829, Spanish Mexican explorers of the Antonia Armijo army named the area “Las Vegas” – Spanish for “the meadows” – after the artesian wells that nourished grassy areas in the area. John C. Fremont literally put Las Vegas on the map.

More than 20,000 copies of his 1848 map were sold, which largely contributed to making Las Vegas a stopover destination on the way west.[13] [See Image 2] In 1854, Congress constructed the first military road that established a monthly mail run from Salt Lake City, Utah, to San Diego, California. One year later, Mormon colonists founded the first settlement meant as a refuge for Mormon travelers to California, as well as a base for a mission to baptize Paiute Indians. A large fort was built to house animals and crops, to the delight of the Indians who occasionally feasted from the harvest, causing the settlers to move all their valuables behind fort walls. After three years of internal conflicts in the desert, the mission was abandoned and the post deserted.[14]

A large gold strike reported in El Dorado Canyon in 1861 renewed interest in Las Vegas. A group of men acquired the Mormon fort, after which it passed ownership a number of times until Montana Senator William Clark purchased it in 1902. Clark wanted to make Las Vegas a division point – a stopover place for crew changes and train servicing – in his proposed San Pedro, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake Railroad. Since the area had water for steam engines and lay somewhat in the middle of the two destinations, Las Vegas was a logical choice; it would become a watering stop. Clark auctioned off lots of the 110 acre "Clark's Las Vegas Townsite" - which would later become the downtown district - on May 15, 1905, the day that became the founding date of Las Vegas. [See Images 3 and 4] Besides the neighboring railroad line, there was little reason for a settlement in the middle of the desert. However, the promise of business from the railroad made the land auction so successful that it lasted until the next day. Clark managed to sell all 1,200 lots, for a total of $265,000.

Although Las Vegas was a young town relative to other cities in the West, its story was nonetheless typical in history of settlement in the West. Las Vegas was a classic western railroad town, little different from others. For speculative reasons, the lots of the town site were laid out in a very common gridiron pattern and they were all equal in size and rather small, to more effectively sell them off. Although the gridiron might have determined the growth of downtown, with lots that were able to accommodate the services that belonged to a whistle stop, it would be far from the ideal urban form for future industries that would develop there. Another urban form that belonged to a different transportation mechanism could much better accommodate industries that demanded large lots – a strip, the anchor of suburbia.

For a brief moment, the future of Las Vegas looked prosperous. The town became a major railroad and trans-shipment point when another railroad was branched out to the silver districts, and an equipment repair center for the trains was built. The town catered to travelers, with clubs and even a red-light district emerging on "Block 16", marking the early beginnings of the resort industry. Las Vegas achieved more administrative independence from the state capital, Carson City, when an entirely new county, Clark County, was created. In 1911, the city became officially incorporated by Nevada legislature, and local business leaders established a Chamber of Commerce that would promote the town. However, in 1919, the mines were running out of ore, leading to the closure of the added railroad branch. An even more dramatic event occurred three years later, when Las Vegas workers joined the Great Railroad Strike, which led the railroad company – now under control of Union Pacific after Clark sold it – to strike back with a

vengeance; it moved its repair centers out of town. Without the jobs that came from the railroad, Las Vegas was doomed to return to dust.

The prehistory of the Strip is defined by such a boom and bust cycle of the economy. According to Gottdiener, "Las Vegas' development has been typical of this boom and bust cycle."[15] Cities in the West typically followed this cycle in contrast to cities on the East Coast or in the Midwest. "Created with little population and a limited infrastructure, they had to attract people and resources in order to grow. Great risks have always been part of the equation in southwest development as most business initiatives were of the speculative kind." [16] Las Vegas developers were speculators, who could make as much profit as they could potentially loose on a risky bet like a city like Las Vegas, isolated in the Mojave Desert. And this desert is more densely populated with ghost towns than it is with success stories.

Las Vegans struggled to look for another industry for the city. Aspiring to become another Palms Springs, which was a Californian desert city that successfully attracted tourists, residents actively marketed Las Vegas as a resort city. A few resorts began to be built and development of the town's first golf course commenced south of city limits in 1927, but the efforts were largely unsuccessful.

Las Vegas was scrambling until the government – an unlikely *deus ex machina* – came to the rescue. First, a Las Vegas lobby managed to have a highway act passed, enabling the widening of the road that connected Las Vegas to Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Highway and the future Las Vegas Strip. The government literally paved the way for tourists to come to Las Vegas. The widening of the road was only the beginning of federal aid to the city. The federal government took steps which really kick-started Las Vegas. According to Las Vegas historian Eugene Moehring, "Federal spending, and lots of it, triggered the rise of modern Las Vegas."[17] When the government announced the federal construction of the Boulder (later named Hoover) Dam in 1928, Las Vegas' future was set. The government dammed the Colorado River, created Lake Mead, and nourished the city with cheap hydroelectric power and water. More importantly, it supplied the fledging casinos with a large market of potential casino customers: dam workers. Government investments of building a dam that provided cheap electricity and paving highways that enabled more tourists to come helped the resort industry grow. Thus, Las Vegas really set off as a Keynesian city.

One year later, prior to US Secretary of Interior Ray Lyman Wilbur's visit to the city to find a place to house the dam workers, Las Vegas attempted to get rid of its wild frontier image. The city was willing to change its image in exchange for the workers. Clubs and brothels were temporarily closed and buildings repainted. Despite this, Las Vegas was rejected. The Secretary wanted to avoid the "boisterous frontier town", preferring to build a new "wholesome American community". Despite the decision that workers would be housed in a new town, "Boulder City", Las Vegas, nonetheless, benefited from visiting dam workers who came for weekend searches for alcohol, prostitution, and gambling – all of which were banned in the city of their own workers. The intended separation of activities between Las Vegas and Boulder City resulted in each city supporting one

another. Las Vegas quickly realized there was profit to be made being the puritan America's "Other".

Ironically, the puritan attitude of federal authorities opened a space for Las Vegas to thrive. The city stepped into providing niche services that most people at the time considered unwholesome or morally questionable, but for which there was still a market. After the disappointment of Wilbur's rejection of Las Vegas, the city's growth was not paralyzed for long. The city learned well from its relationship with Boulder City and would expand that relationship to the rest of the United States. By diametrically opposing itself to that which was proper, it could commodify its differences.

The "otherness" of Las Vegas was institutionalized through state regulations; a whole set of "libertarian" state regulations concerning marriage, divorce, gaming, and taxes became conducive for business in Nevada. In the late 1930s, constitutional amendments prohibited income, inheritance, and estate taxes, and limited property tax in the state. Rich voters in the city of Reno, who attempted to attract more wealth to the state, mainly drove the amendments and the state actively marketed itself as such. [See Image 5]

In 1931, the minimum residency requirement for out-of-state petitioners was lowered from three months to six weeks, immediately doubling the number of divorces. Still, having a residency requirement was important, since it forced people to live in Nevada for a few weeks to be able to obtain a divorce. Dude ranches particularly benefited from the regulation, as they provided extended stays for the well-to-do persons in town waiting for a divorce.

Paramount in attracting capital was the unique legalization of gambling in 1931, which brought about Nevada's eventual 45-year, country-wide monopoly on legalized gambling. Phil Tobin, a Northern Nevada rancher, authored the new gambling law which replaced a very strict anti-gambling law passed 21 years earlier.

These liberal changes both fit into the libertarian attitudes of the people of the state of Nevada and showed a pro-business and pro-entrepreneurial bias, which Nevada has always had, lacking resources. State regulations became Nevada's main "commodity".

Once the regulations were set in place, they were extensively marketed. Postcards, posters, and booklets were printed and distributed to neighboring states, particularly California. In 1935, Nevada started the marketing campaign "One Sound State" to draw wealthy people to the state. In 1936, the First National Bank in Reno and the Nevada State Journal teamed up to distribute a booklet to 10,000 prospects promoting the state. "Nevada has no radical organization in its entire 110,000 square miles. There is no political movement of even slightly pinkish tinge... . The law-makers are cattlemen, miners, lawyers, business, and professional men, and there hasn't been the slightest whisper of radicalism from one of them."[18]

Nevada's unique regulations had a direct impact on the city of Las Vegas. In particular, the legalization of gambling would be responsible for a gambling strip downtown, before the suburban Strip was established later. Within a month of the passing of Tobin's law, Las Vegas issued six licenses. Initially, gambling was restricted on Fremont Street in a

"Red-line" district between 1st and 3rd. This was the place where "Glitter Gulch" would arise, a neon-lit gambling zone. It turned out that by concentrating gambling in a zone, casinos could benefit from the presence of each other, whilst sparking off fierce competition. But the real reason for zoning gambling activities was that this way they could be confined in an area away from the homes of Las Vegans. Gambling was perceived as a hazard to their families. The Las Vegas libertarian attitude toward gambling was for the purposes of business, and it was not representative of what families actually thought of the activity. The uneasy relationship between Las Vegas being a gambling town and a home continues until today.

While most of the United States suffered through the Great Depression, the resort industry of Las Vegas was growing more and more sophisticated. Divorcees passed time in dude ranches, and thousands of dam workers patronized the city's nascent casinos; most of them were on Fremont Street downtown, a few were located further out. Downtown, the Apache opened with the city's first elevator and "swamp coolers", a new evaporative air-cooling system that sucked hot air from outside through wetted pads. First patented in 1906 by John Zellweger, the technology made living in the desert comfortable.

A wave of entrepreneurs and casino operators flocked to Las Vegas, later transforming the town and, above all, the Strip. As outcasts elsewhere, they found a home in a city where their operations were legal. For instance, Tony Cornero, a bootlegger and gambling operator from Los Angeles, was one of the first mobsters to come to Las Vegas. He ran The Meadows Club on Boulder Highway. It was one of the city's first "carpet joints" - more classy than the typical "sawdust joint", with plush carpet, rather than sawdust lying on the floor. It ran a "Meadows revue" produced by a famous Hollywood producer.

Then, in late 1938, Los Angeles elected a new reform mayor who declared war on illegal casinos, which until then were tolerated by the authorities, many more operators left for Las Vegas. At the same time, Mexican president Lazaro Cardenas closed the Agua Caliente Casino in Tijuana. Gamblers as well as operators from Southern California had no choice but to go to Las Vegas.

In addition to the efforts of the clubs to attract gamblers and divorcees, tourist travelers were sought after. Las Vegas promoted itself as "Gateway to the Boulder Dam", and it started its yearly Helldorado Rodeo and Parade in 1934. It expanded, in 1937, with a theme park, the "Helldorado Village", which, according to *The Desert News,* was a "six acre replica of Las Vegas as it existed in the [18]80's, enclosed in a stockade as was used by early western settlers in defense against the Indians."[19] The theme park resembled a movie set western town. It was decked out with "wooden sidewalks, hitching posts, watering troughs, town pumps, and other Western artifacts."[20] The commodification of history, and in this case, the early history of Las Vegas, was an important precursor of later theme parks and replicas that would later surface on the Strip.

Business travelers were courted as well. President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration paid for the city's first convention center (the War Memorial Building) in

1936 and the city's first public golf course one year later. Business travelers had already found their way to the city in 1935: the year Las Vegas held its first major convention, with some 5,000 Southern Californian Shriners. As a result of these combined efforts, Las Vegas managed to attract 300,000 visitors each year.

With the advent of WWII, the federal government would again shape the city of Las Vegas. Because of its remoteness, Las Vegas was considered an ideal location for defense plants and installations, with good, year-round flying weather conditions for air force training. In 1941, the federal government set up a military airport and a gunnery school in an area that would become North Las Vegas. It also commenced construction of a gigantic magnesium plant that employed 10,000 people. The workers and their families were to be accommodated in a new "temporary" town that would become a new city: Henderson. 4,800 B.M.I employees were housed in a tent city,[21]since Las Vegas was overwhelmed by the explosive growth, and many were living in squalid conditions.

Inevitably, many of the new workers would patronize the casinos; most of them visited Fremont Street, with casinos with names that conjured a Western image, such as the Pioneer Club, Frontier Club, Las Vegas Club, Boulder, and El Cortez lining the street. [See Image 6]

By 1945, Freemont Street was transformed into a neon lit "Glitter Gulch". It was not the architecture that dominated the experience of this small street; rather, it was its neon decorations. In 1923, the first neon gaslight was introduced to the United States, when Earle C. Anthony bought two signs for his car dealerships in Los Angeles from Frenchman George Claude, the person who patented neon gas lighting in 1915. People gawked at the mesmerizing lights that were dubbed as "liquid fire". Neon lights would prove to be a popular marketing device, radically transforming cities at night. Downtown casinos, spurred on by competition for customers, eagerly employed the technology as a fierce fire weapon. As a result of the neon war, the lights would get more ornate and spectacular quickly, and their hollow glass tubes began taking ever more elaborate shapes.

It was these neon lights that would put Las Vegas in the attention of cultural and architectural theorists, such as Tom Wolfe and Robert Venturi.[22] They saw it as a vernacular delight from the stern modernist forms of the elite. Venturi admired the detachment of the neon information from the architectural structure as a powerful model for a new postmodern architecture, a "decorated shed," a counter to the purist modernist forms.

While Fremont Street was a bustling with neon and patrons, a dusty little road south of downtown appeared asleep. This was Los Angeles Highway, or Route 91, the road that connected Los Angeles to Las Vegas. It was scattered with a few small clubs; the first one was the Pair-O-Dice in 1931, which had offered illegal drinking and gambling during prohibition. This was the road that would later be called the Las Vegas Strip. At the time, the peripheral Strip was nowhere near a threat to the glittery downtown casinos. Soon, however, it would outshine the place from which it originated and take over as the core of the city.

Guy McAfee was one of the "smart-money lads" that fled from Los Angeles. He had somehow combined his career as a police captain and commander of the vice squad with that of a gambling operator, until the new mayor complicated his normal way of business. He bought the Pair-O-Dice and renamed it the 91-Club. More importantly, he would also rename Route 91. Driving up and down Los Angeles Highway, or Route 91, McAfee nicknamed the road "The Strip," after a section west on Sunset Boulevard in his hometown Los Angeles, which used to thrive on gambling. However, after what was meant as an ironic wink to the much more developed Los Angeles version, turned out quite the opposite; the Strip soon equalled its referent, and then eclipsed it entirely. Only those who consult the *Oxford English Dictionary* will know that the etymology of the Strip - "A street noted for its night-clubs, bars, gambling houses, etc"[23] – originated from Sunset Boulevard; the vast majority will trace "the Strip" to the desert oasis. The Strip was the first simulacrum of Las Vegas.

2.1.2 Solipsistic Suburban Archetype

The Strip was born on April 3, 1941, when Thomas Hull, the visionary behind the Strip, opened El Rancho on Highway 91. El Rancho was the first casino resort on what would later become known as the Las Vegas Strip; all of the resorts that followed resorts extended the Strip towards the south. According to Hopkins and Evans, "The Las Vegas Strip started with Hull, both chronologically and geographically, for the Strip corridor took shape from his resort south."[24] But, in addition to giving birth to the Strip and anchoring its location strategically outside of city limits, the Strip started with El Rancho *typologically*. Besides kick-starting the suburbanization of the Strip, El Rancho set the blueprint for the future Las Vegas Strip casino resort: an automobile-friendly, internally oriented, low-rise structure with a lawn, pool, roadside sign, and bungalows – a miniature suburban utopia.

Thomas Hull flopped as a theatre operator in Deming, New Mexico, but became successful developing hotels, particularly in California. Hull was exploring opportunities to build his eighth hotel in Las Vegas, together with Wayne McAllistar, an unlicensed architect with no architectural education but who had designed the Agua Caliente Casino and Hotel in Tijuana when he was only 19 years old.[25] In a less than coincidental convergence, it was the closure of that same Agua Caliente Casino, in 1938, that had partly caused the growth of Las Vegas as a gambling hub. Symbolic of the shift, the first resort on the Strip was modeled after the closed Agua Caliente one in Tijuana.

To the surprise and skepticism of Las Vegans, Hull decided to build, not in downtown where the other hotels were, but on the Los Angeles Highway, which, at the time, was nothing more than "a two-lane, potholed road, stretching endlessly through a desert wasteland."[26] However, this way, he was free from the city's taxing and zoning laws. At the same time, it proved that this suburbanization of gambling, as a form of containment, was a spatial solution to that was morally questionable.

New inventions, such as electricity and the automobile, enabled Hull to defy the need for a downtown location. "With the help of electricity (which could be transmitted anywhere in the metropolitan zone) and the internal-combustion engine, decentralization became

the key to Las Vegas' development, just as it was in the Los Angeles Basin,"[27] assert historians Green and Moehring. It was no longer necessary to rely on downtown's steam and city water mains or its pedestrian traffic for a hotel to be successful. Although the Strip might have been classified as an example of decentralization at its inception, it would grow to become a core. After feeding off another's physical proximity – and status, workers, and clientele – the Strip would become the preferred location of operators.

The highway location enabled Hull to obtain a large lot and a steady flow of potential guests. Legend has it that Hull, who owned several motels, was well aware of the potential of the highway. "The story of hotelman Tommy Hull, motoring down Highway 91, having a flat tire, and dispatching a friend for help, while he passed away the ensuing time counting cars flashing by, has become legend. One hour of this convinced him that he hadn't given his neck muscles such a workout since the last time he'd played spectator at a tennis match,"[28] wrote the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. Hull lured driving visitors in from the Los Angeles Highway before they had a chance to reach downtown. Besides the vehicular traffic, the advantage of the highway location was that Hull was able to buy a large 30-acre lot, much larger then he could get downtown, on which he could provide resort facilities. It was also much cheaper; legend has it that he was offered it for free, since the woman who owned the property thought it was "worthless" so that Hull paid only $150 an acre.[29] The large lot enabled Hull to move away from hotel typology as it existed downtown. Hull's main innovation was to make an "auto hotel"' by blending the facilities of a luxury hotel with a motel. Downtown hotels on their small lots could not house resort facilities, such as a swimming pool; nor were they as accessible by car, as was the case for the El Rancho, which had plenty of space for parking lots. [See Image 7]

The El Rancho was fundamentally solipsistic, both in its layout and facilities. Vacationers no longer needed to leave the hotel, because, according to the advertising, "El Rancho is complete within itself." [30] It had shops, a travel agency, a swimming pool, a garage, and service station, various sports facilities, riding stables, a main dining room, and a coffee shop. The resort even accommodated a local radio station to which Hull offered free studio space, in exchange for mentioning that it aired "from the fabulous grounds of the fabulous El Rancho Vegas"[31] every 20 minutes. Entertainment would also keep guests on the property. Frank Fay performed with the El Rancho Startlets, who Van Garwood, former band leader, remembered as "very pretty, with scantily-clad outfits and good figures."[32]

With all these activities happening on the grounds of the resort, the casino just happened to be there, as merely one of the activities. This helped divert the attention to other ways of recreation, since gambling was still considered immoral at the time. The official narrative of the resort owners even supported the occasional adding of the casino to the resort, as if it were an afterthought. According to John Cahlan, the editor of *Las Vegas Review-Journal* at the time, Hull, being a hotel, not a casino operator, planned to model El Rancho Las Vegas after the two El Ranchos in California, which did not have gaming. "When he started his motels, several of his friends that he had made here in Las Vegas … said, 'Why don't you build a casino building?'"[33] recalled Cahlan.

Whether true or note, once the casino was added, the typical casino resort typology was complete. The desire of the guests for convenience converged with the hotel's craving for profit in a self-contained suburban resort typology – "complete within itself" – that would set the standard for future development.

The resort was laid out "complete within itself" as well; El Rancho was a true suburban introvert and laid out in a typical suburban subdivision. A central structure housed the casino, restaurant, and theater, around which the rooms were placed. The suburban utopia, El Rancho, revealed itself most clearly in the "El Rancho Village", adjacent to the casino, where guests stayed for weeks at a time. El Rancho was really a dude ranch, where divorcees would hang out while fulfilling their residency requirement. Mimicking the suburban car-oriented lifestyle that many of the Las Vegas visitors – most of them from Southern California – were accustomed to, El Rancho Village was more of a miniature suburb than a hotel. Guests stayed in fully kitchen-equipped bungalows, each with their own lawn, laid out in a typical miniature suburban subdivision, and connected by little paved and lit streets. [See Image 8] The village was effectively a transplantation of suburbia.

The resort dealt with the duality of being internally oriented, whilst at the same time attempting to appeal to the passing automobilist. El Rancho needed to present an inviting façade to potential guests that signified status. Some of its architectural program was used as a symbol and put on display; much like the status of a typical suburban bungalow lied in its front door, driveway, lawn, pool, and mailbox.

Perhaps the casino equivalent of a mailbox was the sign. El Rancho's main sign was a windmill, as was the case for the Agua Caliente Casino, with swirling neon lit blades; "Stop at the Sign of the Windmill," was one of the slogans. [See Image 9] Although the sign was incorporated within the architecture of the resort, it was a predecessor of the isolated signs that soon would tower above the Strip. And when these signs were separated from the architectural structure, and would even compete with their presence, architectural and cultural theorists recognized their importance. The postmodern reversal between signifier and signified, or sign and building, would turn Las Vegas into an iconoclast against Modernism.

El Rancho not only incorporated the quintessential suburban elements, but put them on display: the suburban lawn and pool. In front of the resort, lied a "desert oasis" visible from the highway, with fully-grown trees transported from other places, and rock waterfalls. A staff of ten gardeners maintained the greenery all year round, which soaked up to 10 million gallons of water per month. The stark contrast between oasis and the desert attributed to its effect. Finally, even some of the swimming pool was put on highway display. It was placed right in front of the building, departing from motel tradition, so that it could be seen by passers-by. "Instead of hiding its glittering swimming pool in some patio, they stuck it in their show window, smack on Route 91. It was a stroke of showmanship. No traveler can miss the pool, few can resist it," [34] noted The *Saturday Evening Post.*

As Venturi noted later, this oasis-like nature of the resort, is nothing new but typical of "pleasure zones", such as "Marienbad, the Alhambra, Xanadu, and Disneyland".[35] The architecture manages to place the vacationer in a different world. Besides the natural elements that can help achieve this goal, Venturi recognized symbolism of architecture: "Essential to the imagery of pleasure-zone architecture are lightness, the quality of being an oasis in a hostile context, heightened symbolism, and the ability to engulf the visitor in a new role: vacation from everyday reality."[36] This "heightened symbolism" in architecture, as well as the "ability to engulf the visitor in a new role" often expressed itself in a specific "theme".

El Rancho was also an archetype in its application of a theme throughout the resort. Since Hull already had two hotels in California that carried the El Rancho name (El Rancho Sacramento and El Rancho Fresno), both designed by Wayne McAllister, he wanted to use their thematic template and trademark design. In addition, McAllister, reaping the benefits from the design of his earliest resort, designed El Rancho Las Vegas much after the Agua Caliente Casino. The resort was even promoted as the "Caliente of Nevada". McAllister split the theme for El Rancho in two: the exterior was in a colonial Spanish mission style, obviously taken from his Tijuana project, and the interior in a western style. On the inside, the Wild West theme was expressed through decorations and furniture. Coach wheel chandeliers, stretched calfskins tied with buckskin thongs, and carved cattle brands hung from the ceilings. Cowhide curtains were draped from poles decorated by cattle horns. The Wild West theme was a plain manifestation of the primitive conquest of nature in the desert – a recurring theme on the Strip.

The Wild West theme also helped manage the contradiction of being a lavish and modern hotel, while not being too intimidating to passing travelers. Best and Hillier noted the dilemma: "By contrast with the unexciting hostelries of the 1930s, El Rancho seemed so tony in the eyes of its owners that it scared them. Would dust-stained travelers feel out of place in all this splendor?"[37] The Wild West theme was crucial in the social organization of experience that lowered the threshold of potential visitors and made them feel comfortable. At the same time, the theme enticed a daredevil attitude among patrons, which was associated with the west.

The Wild West theme extended to decorum and staff outfits. Van Garwood had to wear a hand-embroidered western outfit. "We wore guns; we were all cowboys,"[38] he said. Even Hull, on opening night, surprised tuxedo-wearing casino patrons when he showed up in jeans and boots, drawling, "Howdy Podner." His oft-spoken phrase "Come as you are" would become the resort's motto. It was a deliberate attempt to attract families and make them comfortable in the resort. The Wild West theme became associated with comfort and hospitality. "The Rancho somehow has managed to make the riveter, the carpenter and the truck driver at home in overalls in the same rooms with men and women in smart clothes, with an eloping Lana Turner posing for news photographs… No resort is likely to succeed in Vegas that doesn't accomplish this democracy,"[39] said the *Saturday Evening Post.* The theme of the Wild West, rather than that of a bow-tie-Monte Carlo approach, effaced cultural differences between customers, lowering the threshold to step inside. [See Image 10]

An image of the brochure reveals the multiple symbolic elements at work. It depicts a voluptuous and scarcely dressed "cow girl" standing in front of the El Rancho hacienda. "A truly Modern hotel," states the brochure. "A remarkable desert oasis famed for its invigorating climate, stimulating atmosphere, and old 'Old West' hospitality." Multiple themes operate together, in a synthesis typical of future resorts. The theme of nature: "oasis"; the western role play: "'Old West' hospitality"; and the theme of sex: "stimulating atmosphere". All of these modes fit under the umbrella of the theme of being the most novel of all: "a truly modern hotel", typed in a freeform modern shape. Even though the Wild West was evoked, it was simply an image within which customers could enjoy the comfort of a modern hotel.

Despite the fact that the surroundings offered little but dry desert land, the El Rancho, "complete within itself", was a huge success. "The place was jam-packed from opening night on… I was absolutely amazed at the number of people that came. Why? Highway 91 was so busted up that if you went over 40 miles per hour, you'd break an axle,"[40] said Van Garwood. El Rancho's miniature suburban utopia set the typological blueprint for the first phase of resort construction on the Strip. Still quite crudely and literally expressed in the El Rancho Village, it would be refined by subsequent casino resorts throughout the years.

2.1.3 Movie Set Architecture

The second resort on the Strip, the Last Frontier, set the pace for competition. Seasoned theatre operators, who were highly skilled promoters that knew how to use urbanism as an extension of publicity well, developed it. In competitive fashion, the resort was deliberately more extreme in all its aspects: it was bigger and had more facilities. "If El Rancho was splendid, the Last Frontier would be splendiferous – that was the theme set by Griffith and Moore, and it has remained the theme of Las Vegas resort hotels ever since. The newest with the mostest,"[41] wrote Katherine Best and Katharine Hillyer. But, most importantly, it was more themed than the El Rancho, to the extent that the resort was more like an actual theme park or movie set. For the theatre operators, it was only natural to take the theme to the extreme. The Last Frontier kick-started the resort wars that would soon rage on the Strip, and it set an important precedent for an architecture of replicas and fake.

Texas movie theatre mogul, R.E. Griffith, and his theatre architect nephew, William Moore, wanted to build a large hotel and theatre in Deming, New Mexico - coincidentally, the same town where Thomas Hull also tried to operate one. Moore had already finished the drawings, but while they were in Los Angeles, they heard of the developments in Vegas and decided to make a brief stopover. They stayed at the El Rancho and were impressed with the potential of Las Vegas: "We came to Las Vegas and found that the opportunities were fabulous,"[42] said Moore. The project in New Deming was canceled; Las Vegas was too good of an opportunity to pass on. One year after El Rancho, they would open their resort, almost directly opposite its archrival and archetype.

The Last Frontier was to upstage the El Rancho in all respects. The resort measured up to what already existed in the form of El Rancho, and it tried to overdo it on all fronts: scale, program, as well as style. The Last Frontier had more parking spaces, more green, and a pool that was as close to the highway as possible. [See Image 11] In addition, it would add a fully-fledged theme park and the glamour of Hollywood celebrities.

The Last Frontier and the relationship it created between Las Vegas and the movie industry would shape the future of the town. Griffith and Moore were successful promoters, who helped the theatre industry grow to the extent that many Americans would see a movie several times a week. They fully exploited the alliance between the resort and movie industry. "Movie making and Las Vegas gambling were closely linked as industries devoted to mass-producing leisure that incorporated fantasy. Strip hotels ceaselessly identified themselves with film stars in their promotion,"[43] asserted Findlay. At the same time, both the resort and the film industry thrived on exploiting popular culture.

In addition to their mutual resemblances, the resort and the movie industry on the Strip had an *actual* connection, since Griffith combined his career as a theatre mogul – his family owned hundreds of theatres – with that of a resort operator. Griffith's contacts with movie stars brought celebrity performers to the Last Frontier, many of whom were lured by Hull for double their normal fees. A spatial manifestation of his connections came in the form of the Leo Carrillo bar, in honor of one of Griffith's friends and a famous western star, the Cisco Kid's sidekick.

The alliance between the resort industry and the movie industry would only continue to grow, especially since the nexus of the movie industry, Hollywood, laid only a few hours' drive away. In William Fox's view, the success of Las Vegas lied in this alliance, since casinos "relied on a growing synergy with Hollywood, using by association the glamour of the movie industry to make the exoticism of Las Vegas – some of it faux, some genuine – attractive to the national audience of a mass medium."[44] In addition, as long as Las Vegas modeled itself after movie imagery and stereotypes, it would become an interesting backdrop and subject for the camera, and it would be disseminated to a global audience. The link between Hollywood and Las Vegas would allow images of the Strip to be projected globally. In order for Las Vegas to extend its image, all it needed to do was build on America's fascination with Hollywood and nourish its spectral qualities.

The theatre developers planned on using their experience to promote El Rancho, in addition to advancing Las Vegas as a general destination. "We had to bear in mind that a lot of promotion was going to have to be done, which we were familiar with because of the theater operation,"[45] said Moore. Publicity for the Last Frontier was important - especially since the resort was even further out than El Rancho; it was two miles out of town, which caused Las Vegans to doubt that the isolated resorts could succeed. Griffith and Moore's attitude towards publicity was in stark contrast with that of casino operators only a decade ago. "During the first few years after gambling was legalized, the gaming-room managers made almost no attempt to publicize their establishments. To most of them, operating within the law was a completely new experience, and it took them some time to accustom themselves to their altered status and to realize the tremendous

opportunity it offered,"[46] wrote Lewis in 1953. Casinos accepted the marginalized or illegitimate status of the gambling industry even after it became legalized. In contrast, at the Last Frontier, publicity machines worked at full throttle. But it was not so much gambling that was advertised, as were other activities the resort offered. Gambling appeared almost incidental, included in a host of other facilities, just like El Rancho had done.

The Last Frontier was even more western-themed than its neighbor. "The Last Frontier was conceived to be as near western as we could make it," said Moore, "and we tried to carry that theme out in everything that was done."[47] Coincidentally, it so happened that Griffith also planned on calling his resort El Rancho, but since it was already taken, there was a problem; "… they interfered with his planned method of promotion," said Moore. Since Griffith could not use the name of El Rancho, he came up with the Last Frontier, in addition to "a slogan which we always thought a very good one; The Early West in Modern Splendor."[48] [See Image 12]

Giffith and Moore invented a theme that drew from the frontier. This is ironic, because by that time the American frontier period was long gone. Moreover, Las Vegas never really was a frontier. There were barely any cowboys in Las Vegas. Las Vegas was just a transportation hub: a railroad stop. Rather than being a reflection of actual Las Vegas history, they used the frontier image for tourist consumption, and modeled their resort after examples of western movies from Hollywood.

The theme was taken seriously, and carried through in the resort's design. Ute Indian masonry artisans were brought in from New Mexico to build the fireplaces and sandstone patios. There was a gift shop with Mexican and Indian jewelry, saddles, and western costumes. Moore organized rodeos and roping events, and independent guides were available for fishing and hunting. Merle Richard, owner of Las Vegas' "Little Church of the West," once part of the complex, commented on the interior design: "Everything was western. The beds had horns over them and there were cow horns everywhere; they had a big old bar out of Tombstone, Arizona that had a bunch of old stuffed animals on top. The barstools were saddles with the stirrups still on them. The headboards looked like big oxen yokes and the chandeliers looked like they come off a ranch. God, if it had been left that way it would have been beautiful today."[49]

Griffith and Moore had practical reasons for the theme as well. Since the resort was built during wartime and supplies were scarce, a lot of the materials used were salvaged, adding to the Wild West feel of the place. They bought mines and stripped them of their electrical wires and other materials, in addition to ranches on which they raised cattle to supply the resort with food and milk. The existing Pair-o-Dice club, situated on the site bought by Griffith, was incorporated into the resort. Moore and Griffith also bought the bullet-scarred bar of the infamous Arizona Club in Block 16 downtown, infamous for prostitution. But, to their disappointment, the holes were plugged and the bar varnished upon delivery. In order to bring back the Western look, the bar was immediately sandblasted and shot up with holes again.

The real innovation of the Last Frontier was its incorporation of a full-fledged theme park. Moore would take the Wild West theme to the extreme, constructing an actual theme park. Although truly novel, the idea was not in Las Vegas, since the Helldorado Village had been around for a few years already. Moore, architect and theatre operator, incorporated a theme park into the resort as an advertising method, and he constructed it like a movie set.

One year after the opening of the Last Frontier, Moore planned the Last Frontier Village: a resurrected western town, housing a collection of artifacts from the mining industry. [See Image 13] The village was nothing less than an extension of Moore's publicity campaign. "It was an advertising method in order to induce people to come to the hotel and stay there – patronize the hotel, patronize the village,"[50] Moore said. It would become a major tourist attraction. But, to the advantage of its visitors, since it was essentially advertising, it was free. "So we started creating that whole street or village as it would have existed in Nevada or any other part of the west – but principally in Nevada – and attempted to display all the stuff in a museum-usable fashion, so that it would be displayed in public and the public would be allowed to see it and use it and actually were not to be charged for viewing it… "[51] Most of the collection came from a millionaire gambler and compulsive collector – a kleptomaniac, according to many – named Doby Doc. 900 tons of relics were hauled over from his warehouses in Elko, including mechanical pianos, Indian artifacts, a complete printing press, a bustle of a prominent madam of one of the mining camps, antique guns, and the oldest Joss house in the United States, from Chinese workers of the Central Pacific Railroad. There was also an old wooden jail from Tuscarora in the 1870s, whose walls were charred by a tragic failed escape from a fire. Although the origins of Doby's collections were questionable, they were nonetheless exhibited and incorporated into the village.

In the village, history was as much commodified as it was used for publicity. The "museum-usable fashion" Moore mentioned, perhaps a slip of the tongue, reveals the dilemma. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* commented on "the problem of providing commercial shops, yet retaining the flavor of the old west."[52] Perhaps, appropriately, a trading post was turned into a gift shop. But the additions of a maple furniture shop, a cactus shop, and a modern health club fit less into the old west theme. Moreover, in the process of publicization, objects, previously on private display, were made public. History as publicity can be seen as a form of democratization, yet in this process, authenticity ceded to publicity. Moore was not interested in providing an authentic representation of the West: "People aren't interested in the sober West, only the wild West."[53] And so Hollywood – and Orientalist – stereotypes, rather than actual scenes, were reproduced. For instance, life-size papier-mâché figures adorned the streets, including "Flat Rack Jack, Rabbit Sam, Sherriff Bill McGee, Poker Pete, and a Chinaman, Sit-tu-Long … The Chinaman, Sit-tu-Long, has been doing just that – you'll find him out in back."[54]

When there were no authentic buildings available, or when existing buildings were not "authentic" enough, another authenticity predicament presented itself. In these cases, buildings were recreated. For instance, in order to get a slice of the divorce and marriage business, the Last Frontier incorporated a wedding chapel in the resort, "the Little Church

of the West." [See Image 14] Since most of the existing churches in Las Vegas had an exterior that did not look like that of a church, Moore traveled in search of a more "authentic" western-looking church, so that he could construct a scaled down replica out of Californian redwood. But when he found one, he realized he needed to copy it in miniature, since all he required was a chapel, not a full sized church. "I went to California and took numerous pictures of an old church that existed and was in operation, and then brought the pictures back and induced Zick and Sharp to reduce them down in size using the whole scale of the church and the measurement that I took at the time I took the pictures, so they became a miniature of the actual church in operation in the state of California. They did make the drawings, and we got our maintenance crew at the hotel to build it according to the drawings that they made on a miniature basis,"[55] said Moore.

Since the church was in effect a miniature copy of an existing church, it appeared slightly out of scale. This "miniature effect" actually contributed to making it more seductive, a cute, almost like a miniature model church. It is perhaps for this reason the church still exists today, although on a different site. The rescaling of existing buildings or architectural elements, whether making them bigger or smaller, would be a much used architecture method for resort operators on the Strip. It served as a valuable tool to make buildings appear more unreal and attract attention.

When there was no actual building to be replicated, movie sets helped conjure an image. In 1950, Moore opened the Golden Slipper Saloon and Gambling Hall, but he was forced to rename it to the Silver Slipper, since competitor Golden Nugget threatened to sue, leading Moore to buy the name of an existing place called the Silver Slipper – western names were immensely popular. The casino was inspired by Barbary Coast Western architecture. Architect Richard Stadelman consulted motion picture research laboratories, since they had western village data available in order to construct western movie sets, including actual Barbary Coast sets.

The Last Frontier's "museum-usable" village resembled a theme park more than it did a museum. An amusement park for children, complete with train and pony rides, contributed to the anachronistic mix of history in the village. Besides the actual mining trains on display, an old San Francisco cable car transported guests between the village and the hotel. A main village street was created, lined by vintage automobiles.

As tip of the iceberg, Moore invented a narrative for his village. The village was initiated with an event: a contest for a girl, who would fit a tiny gilded slipper and who would be a western version of Cinderella and the queen of the village. For Moore, it was not sufficient to put history on display; it needed to be reinvented via a plot to somehow serve as a form of self-justification.

The village served as an important precedent for future resorts. Especially in the 1990s, many resorts took on theme park like properties. The Last Frontier Village was an early example of what some later coined the "hyperreal": a world in which the real has been replaced by copies and fakes that look more real than the original. This is achieved through an architecture of movie-sets, miniature replicas, and reinvented history.

As both a theatre architect and promoter, for Moore, architecture was a natural extension of publicity. Moore eventually quit his job as an architect and became the general manager of the resort. As a former designer, he was highly fluent in any symbolic incongruities that might lurk in the resort. Moore would tell employees to park in front of the hotel and would turn on some lights in empty rooms as to make the resort look busy. "The place would actually be deserted, but they made it look like there were people in there,"[56] said Art Force, the hotel's publicist. Image matters - especially when almost exactly the same architectural program is offered by multiple competing enterprises, only a stone's throw away from another. In such a case, distinctions can only be achieved symbolically. Symbolic capital would become the main currency on the Las Vegas Strip.

2.2 Los Angeles Cool

The Strip was transformed radically after – and as a result of - World War II. Fatigued by the war efforts, many Americans flocked to leisure, consumerism, and suburbia. Soldiers returned from the war with money in their pockets. The resort industry benefited from this, and, backed by a new source of illegitimate funding, saw a building boom hit the Strip. An important stylistic shift occurred, inspired by new roadside architecture built in Los Angeles, as well as the exotic places and shows seen by American soldiers returning from Europe. As a result, new themes were introduced to the Las Vegas Strip, and it broke away from the Wild West image. Finally, as America entered the Cold War, Nevada took a central role as a nuclear testing site. With detonations visible from Las Vegas, a space age theme surfaced on the Strip.

When the war ended, Las Vegas started to market the city more systematically, through different media, while cleaning up its image. Las Vegas feared the exodus of defense workers. For instance, the Magnesium Plant already stopped production in 1944, and as a result, half of Henderson's houses were vacated. One effort to stimulate the tourism industry was the Live Wire Fund, established by the Chamber of Commerce in 1944. It managed to raise $84,000 alone in the first year, more money for advertising per capita than any other city in the United States. As part of the marketing campaign, the chamber staged the first pro-am golf tournament, a way to attract potential gamblers as well as the national media. The chamber went on to hire the recognized advertising agency J. Walter Thompson. In 1948, Steve Hannegan was the new head, and founded the Desert Sea New Bureau. The bureau published images of Las Vegas tourists that were sent to their local newspaper and images of showgirls and celebrities - so called "cheesecake" photos – all over the national press. Unsurprisingly, newspapers eagerly publicized images of poolside, bikini-clad, and martini drinking celebrities and tourists. Through distributing these glamorous images of Las Vegas, and through the production of local and national "news" events, Las Vegas quickly popularized.

In addition, Las Vegas realized its Wild West image had to be polished if it were to be successful to a larger audience. One effort to clean up the city's reputation was the fight against prostitution. Brothels reopened after the war, since 1942, when prostitution was reluctantly banned by the city.[57] The army had demanded the move, which saw the rate of venereal disease under soldier's demise, as well as increase the amount of capital on casino tables. In 1946, churches and citizens forced county leaders to reject re-

legalization, after which the vice squad started raiding down the obvious offenders. Informally, of course, things were different, and the ambiguous relationship of Las Vegas with prostitution continues today. However, the link between prostitution and gambling was officially removed, which cleaned up the image of the gambling industry.

At the same time, more funds became available to the Las Vegas Strip, and gambling became a more secure industry, which allowed the building of more glamorous resorts. A generation of slick gangsters moved to the desert, which provided, according to Hal Rothman, a "new regime of capital".[58] Organized crime had more money to spend – and launder – than the first maverick hotel and theatre operators on the Strip. Their funds were behind the new wave of resorts on the Strip. When the Kefauver hearings cracked down on organized crime between 1950 and 1951, many gangsters fled to Las Vegas. Kefauver's committee also visited Las Vegas, but nobody in Las Vegas was convicted. However, the hearings made the link between organized crime and Las Vegas visible to a mass media audience. Although the mafia operated behind a façade of legitimate fronts, many were aware of the Strip's criminal connections. "Drug money founded modern Las Vegas,"[59] wrote Denton and Morris in their 1963 "The Green Felt Jungle". "The city's casinos thrived as centers for the laundering and investment of billions in drug profits,"[60] they claimed. The mafia nonetheless operated behind a façade of respected and local casino 'owners'. "The big guessing game in Las Vegas is 'Who owns whom,'" they wrote. "Though there are many big hoodlums in Las Vegas operating openly as licensed owners in plush Strip casinos, there are many more that operate behind legitimate or semi-legitimate fronts."[61] At the same time, the funding of the Strip increased as a result of informal agreements between casinos, which stabilized the industry, making investments in casinos more secure. Casinos self-regulated to some extent; after a price war in 1948, they informally standardized odds on most games, as well as wages and prices.[62]

The investors of the new resorts changed the look and feel of the Strip. Most of them were experienced gamblers, and they structured their resorts around the profitable activity. While gambling was almost an afterthought for the two first resorts on the Strip, it now became central. Slot machines and tables diffused throughout the resorts. Reid and Demaris called Las Vegas a "greenfelt jungle" in this respect. "Las Vegas is a city in statistics only. In every other respect, it is a jungle – a jungle of green-felt crap tables, roulette layouts, and slot machines in which the entire population, directly or indirectly, is devoted to fleecing tourists."[63] At the same time, the new owners had a more glamorous image in mind. No longer was Las Vegas a "Poor Man's Monte Carlo".[64] Money mattered, and it bought status. "It's the money," said a casino assistant at the Sands, in 1963, to Denton and Morris, "the presence of it, the obviousness of it, that distorts all other values. It's the only thing that matters in this town. A man with $10,000 to lose gets a ringside table. A man with only $5,000 gets the table in back of him."[65]

Although typologically similar to the first two resorts, stylistically, the new resorts were different. The new resorts conformed to a modern, sleek style that each had a slightly different theme. Even though the new resorts each had different themes, the new themes were not taken as literally as the Wild West theme, and the modern style prevailed. Early on, *Harper* noted the modern design, colors, and landscaping of the new resorts: "The

five postwar hotels have that rich sleekness of modern design that suggests suavity and impermanence. Soft colors, soft lights, and the cool dimness so blessed on the desert. Dewy lawns laid on imported soil, and painfully maintained against nature. Handsome, yes; inviting yes. But little incongruities keep alerting you to where you are."[66] According to Alan Hess, the origins of this new design trend lay in the new roadside architecture of Los Angeles. Many of the Strip's architects and operators were Angelinos. Hess classifies it as a "Los Angeles Modern" style, or "Googie", derived from the modern aesthetics of the roadside coffee shops and drive-in restaurants of Los Angeles in the 1950s. According to Hess, the 1930s influx of the automobile in Los Angeles saw the rise of a service industry, such as coffee shops and supermarkets, which catered to the car. The architecture co-opted a curved sleek and modern aesthetic, a symbolic fit with the new era of the automobile. One of the major proponents of this style was Wayne McCallister, the same architect who had designed El Rancho, and would design two of the new modern Strip resorts, the Desert Inn and the Sands. Siegel had initially offered him the commission of the Flamingo as well, but McCallister declined, because at the end of the war, materials were scarce.[67]

The connection between Las Vegas and Los Angeles was quickly recognized. In a 1950 *The New Yorker* article, Liebling wrote: "Las Vegas has more in common economically and temperamentally with Los Angeles and Hollywood, three hundred miles southwest, than with Reno, four hundred and fifty miles northwest … Las Vegas is what biologists would call a commensal of Los Angeles County."[68] Economically, the connection was obvious. An article in the *Saturday Evening Post*, as early as 1942, already commented on this. "Another kind of capital has moved in from Los Angeles… the smart-money lads, knowing a good thing when they see it, have migrated to Vegas almost en masse."

What helped the Strip was that after World War II, suburbanization ran full throttle in the United States and, above all, in Southern California. And the same Colorado River that fed the water-hungry suburban lawns in Los Angeles watered those in Las Vegas. Finally, Hollywood and television glorified the suburban lifestyle of Southern California, and its leisure equivalent in Las Vegas, around the nation, and across the world.

2.2.1 Hollywood Hype

The third resort on the Strip, the Flamingo, was crucial in the Strip's formation. Conceived by Billy Wilkerson, a Hollywood publicist, operator of fashionable nightclubs, and gambler, he knew how to up the level of the Las Vegas Strip resorts a notch. The Flamingo introduced sleek aesthetics, a bigger focus on gambling, and a hip Hollywood crowd to the Strip. It was the first resort to break away from the Wild West image of the Strip, and the Flamingo opened it up to new themes and aesthetics. The Flamingo was centered around the casino. Future resorts would learn from the approach that placed the casino first and other facilities second. Finally, just as important as the actual building construction was the legend of the Flamingo. The violent death of its gangster-operator, Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, brought the Strip national attention and turned it into an exotic movie canvas that hyped Las Vegas.

Billy Wilkerson started as a silent movie operator in New Jersey, and moved to Hollywood, where he started a movie industry trade paper, the *Hollywood Reporter*. He then opened a string of nightclubs that catered to the partying Hollywood crowd. Being an avid gambler, who for some reason believed that the only way out of his expensive addiction was to own a casino, he wanted to attract the wealthy Southern Californian crowd to the desert. Therefore, he modeled the Flamingo after the Beverly Hills Hotel. Wilkerson also introduced exotic themes. The Flamingo's showroom was modeled after Paris's Moulin Rouge. He planned a Parisian style restaurant and a retail store with French made jewelry. Finally, Wilkerson named the resort after the colorful creatures he had seen in Florida.

By drawing from far-away places and creatures, Wilkerson initiated a trend for resort developers on the Strip to evoke the exotic. Once the Wild West theme was broken, other resorts followed suit. The El Rancho immediately redecorated the interior of its western themed cottages in an upscale French provincial style. With each innovation on the Los Angeles Highway, heavy competition required each casino to recover from a symbolic disadvantage. Once the exotic had come to the Strip, there was no looking back to the Wild West.

According to Gene Moehring, this thematic break allowed for a "diversity of images"[69] on the Strip, which was not present downtown, where the Wild West theme still dominated. Downtown could never really break away from the Wild West mold, partly because of the context architects worked in. The Strip, however, as a new form of suburbia in the desert, was more easily treated as a blank slate. Unconstrained by existing local cultural conditions, the desert was an ideal canvas on which to mimic popular culture. Besides the fact that there was plenty of space for green lawns, parking, and a pool, the lack of context cleared the way for foreign, exotic, and historical themes. In the context of the barren desert, spectacle was more easily refashioned.

Wilkerson introduced a sleek, modern, and colorful facade on the Strip that was directly imported from Los Angeles. Wilkerson hired Hollywood nightclub designer George Vernon Russell, who had also designed his Ciro's, the club so populous with celebrities. Thin horizontal lines and a large glass façade dominated the building that faced towards the road. The hip Hollywood crowd more easily associated itself with this new aesthetic, instead of the Wild West look. "To capture its sweep and grandeur you have to be conditioned by a Goldwyn set that's been dolled up by Orson Welles. This Flamingo is indeed a most colorful and amazing bird,"[70] wrote Hank Greenspun in *Las Vegas Life.* The Flamingo's style, according to Alan Hess, was "Los Angeles modernism", a sleek modern aesthetic with a roadside-facing facade, a radical departure from the wagon wheels and cattle horns.[71] [See Image 15]

Wilkerson was a chronic gambler, and his compulsion influenced the design. First of all, he knew that the location of Vegas was ideal for a casino, since the town had limited attractions and distractions for gamblers. Wilkerson bought land even further down the Strip than the other resorts, since land there was cheaper and further removed from the competition.[72][See Image 16] In addition, as a compulsive gambler, he knew well how to

best design a casino. “The layout he had in mind was radical. It called for the casino to be placed at the center, ‘the hub’ of the hotel. No guest would be able to move around the hotel without passing through the casino. There would be no windows. ‘Never let them see daylight,’ he commanded. … No sunsets or sunrises would be visible from the crab or blackjack tables. No wall clocks would be installed, and the lights would be permanently dimmed,”[73] wrote Wilkerson’s son. In order to encourage gambling, Wilkerson planned an architecture of disorientation. Moreover, compared to other resorts, the Flamingo was to be even more internally oriented.

This organization of experience would become typical of future casinos. The assumption was that the architecture of disorientation, in which people supposedly felt permanently lost and confused, both spatially and temporally, would make them more inclined to consume. This type of experience would later be labeled as a typical experience of postmodern space, which deliberately disorients and confuses in order to make its subjects more susceptible to consumption and more subject to an invisible authority.

However, Wilkerson’s gambling addiction meant that he needed to dip into additional financial resources. He accepted a $1 million investment from Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel’s partners. Moe Dalitz had sent Siegel, famously associated with Murder Incorporated, to Las Vegas in 1941, in order to convert the local race bookies to his own wire service. Siegel invested profits in local ventures and took an interest in the struggling Flamingo. With no experience in construction, he took over the project, managing the Flamingo poorly: construction costs skyrocketed from a planned $1 million to $6 million. Building materials were often stolen from the construction site, after which they would be resold to Siegel.

Siegel’s paranoia, which affected the construction’s progress, added to the costs. After construction was underway, Siegel replaced the original architect, with Los Angeles architect Richard Stadelman. Siegel had initially offered the commission to Wayne McCallister, but he declined because materials were scarce.[74] With much of the resort already built, Siegel had walls broken down so that he could adjust Wilkerson’s vision to that of his own. His private suite had an escape hatchet with easy access to a getaway car. The resort had a zigzagging maze of secret passageways and staircases, some of them leading to nowhere. Bugsy even ordered a private plumbing and sewer system for each hotel room, adding more than $1 million to the costs.[75]

The hidden maze was not merely a consequence of Siegel’s strange behavior; rather, it was a spatial manifestation of the secrecy under which the new regime of capital was used to operate. They were outlaws in other parts of the country, operating in an industry that was illegal outside of Nevada. Even though gambling would lose much of its moral stigma later, and, even when the mafia had long left Las Vegas, secrecy would mark the gambling industry. It continued to enforce a strict front and back of house separation, in order to make opaque the mechanisms of power, and to keep away the scrutinizing eye of any potential outsider.

Siegel rushed to finish the hotel before the opening, transforming the dry desert to a plush green oasis, within a short space of time. According to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, five days before the opening, there was still no landscaping of the 40-acre site: "Not a blade of grass was to be seen, and the only vegetation visible was a sorry bit of mesquite here and there." In a dramatic and violent transformation of the desert, "truckloads of rich topsoil... acres of green lawn… regal date pals from the Orient… exotic flowers and shrubs… and fifteen varieties of fully grown trees, including rare cork trees from Spain, completed the spectacular view."[76]

In addition to the spectacle of nature, Siegel enforced a new dressed code quite opposite the prevailing tradition on the Strip. He forced the entire male staff to wear tuxedos, and required male guests to wear a jacket and tie, preferable a tuxedo, which made many of the locals uncomfortable. After it opened, with parts of the hotel still unfinished, the casino was losing money so that only four weeks after opening night, it had to be closed. When the Flamingo re-opened in 1947, it was complete – it had 105 guest rooms, a gym, health club, tennis courts, shops, steam rooms, a swimming pool, stables for forty horses, and a nine-hole golf course. With these added recreational activities, the suburban resort type had come to full fruition. Just around the time when the Flamingo started to make money, Siegel was shot dead in his house in Beverly Hills.

Siegel's violent death had major consequences for the Strip. There could have been no better fodder for paparazzi than the murder of a good-looking gangster. The gruesome death was reported all over the national news, and the mafia was publicly linked to Las Vegas. "Siegel's .30-caliber send-off not only made headlines from L.A. to London, but also linked the handsome psychopath forever with the fortunes of Las Vegas,"[77] claims John L. Smith. Siegel instantly became the most famous casino operator – unfortunately for him, posthumously.

In addition, Siegel's death instantly turned him into the founding father of the Strip; his role expanded to mythical proportions. In the popular imagination, the Flamingo would become counted as the first resort on the Strip, started by gangster Siegel – even though El Rancho, not the Flamingo, was the first resort on the Strip, and it was Billy Wilkerson, not Bugsy, who conceived of the Flamingo. The myth helped to popularize Las Vegas and would be reproduced as late as 1991 in the movie *Bugsy*, in which Warren Beauty, as Bugsy, conceived of his vision of the Flamingo in the middle of the Los Angeles Highway in the empty desert: "I have found the answer to the dreams of America. Look, what do people always fantasize about? Sex, romance, money, adventure? I'm building a monument to all of them! … I'm talking about a hotel. I'm talking about Las Vegas, Nevada, a place where gambling is allowed, where everything is allowed. The whole territory is wide open. I'm talking about a palace, an oasis, a new city." Although Wilkerson influenced the Flamingo's actual aesthetics and layout, it was Siegel who was inadvertently responsible for its mythical ones – and the Hollywood legend of the Strip.

Scared by Siegel's threats and gruesome reputation, Wilkerson had abandoned the project before it opened. Ironically, what had caused Wilkerson to exit the project was, at the same time, a publicist's nirvana: a mad murdering gangster. Siegel was better publicity

for the Flamingo than Wilkerson could ever wish for. Hollywood eagerly took advantage of the exotic and well-known status of the resort. By 1955, no less than seven major motion pictures were filmed at the Flamingo. Siegel's death had cemented Las Vegas as a spectacular location for movies. But no longer was Las Vegas a mere backdrop in cinema, like it had been during the Wild West days, in which movie makers simply used Las Vegas as a location for western movies. With regards to the media Las Vegas had shown to be capable of producing national news events. Las Vegas had been promoted from movie canvas to character.

2.2.2 The Strip from Lower Case to Upper Case

Now that the Strip had formed images of exaggerated suburban types and architectural exoticness, and had the ability to distribute them, thanks to the close association of Las Vegas with Hollywood and the national media, the Strip could finally mature. The four new resorts built after the Flamingo further consolidated the position of the Los Angeles Highway, which was promoted from "a strip" to "the Strip." In a time when postwar Americans fled to leisure and consumerism, the Strip became upper case – it reached its adolescence. With the media sending the message across the country, and a new airport on the Strip reeling in visitors, the Strip experienced immense growth. Yet, the four new resorts were remarkably similar. Although the four resorts introduced new themes, they had a similar style and type: they were thematic variations of a suburban resort.

Three of the four casinos were financed by organized crime. Former casino boat operator Marion Hicks, another operator who was forced out of California, opened the Thunderbird in 1948. Mafiosi Meyer Lansky allegedly financed the resort. The Thunderbird, like the Flamingo, was named after a bird, but this time, one that was tied to the region. Having adopted a symbol of the Navajo Indian tribe, the "sacred bearer of happiness unlimited", the resort was a modern interpretation of a Native American style. A sign depicting a multi-colored bird crowned the top of the first observation tower on the Strip. The Thunderbird also introduced the first *porte-cochere* on the Los Angeles Highway – a beamed canopy over the access road from the Strip – another architectural gesture to lure in the automobilists, which facilitated the transition between the highway and the resort. [See Image 17]

A few months after the opening of the Thunderbird, Clark County bought Alamo Air Field and established the first commercial airport in Las Vegas. It was named after Senator McCarran and located four miles south of the Flamingo on the Los Angeles Highway. It would make Las Vegas more accessible to Americans, many of whom were recovering from the Second World War and sought relief in the form of leisure and consumerism. The airport's location on the Strip would favor the casinos, as it brought them many business travelers, as well as tourists. The Thunderbird, for instance, was the first resort on the Strip to host a convention: a gathering of air-conditioning experts. Still, with the opening of the Thunderbird, the Strip was still referred to as the Los Angeles Highway "strip", in lower case letters and within quotation marks. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* headlined "Desert Area Becomes 'White Way'." It referenced the area with Broadway New York, the "Great White Way". The Strip was not mature enough to stand on its own.

The moment the Desert Inn, the fifth resort on the Los Angeles Highway, opened in 1950, the Strip's name advanced from lower case to upper case. The legitimate Wilbur Clark, who was previously a bellhop and dishwasher in a hotel in San Diego before he ended up owning the place, conceived the resort. He was another gambler who fled from Los Angeles. When the funding for his project in Las Vegas became exhausted, most of the financing would come from Mafiosi Moe Dalitz. Dalitz would appear in front of Kefauver's committee the following year, although he was not convicted. The Desert Inn immediately became the largest employer in the state, with more than 300 employees. The weekend after its opening, real estate transactions on the Strip hit the half million-dollar mark, and two more large resorts on the Strip were in the pipeline. In a moment of great optimism, the Las Vegas Resort Hotels Committee heralded Las Vegas as the "Fun and Entertainment Capital of the World". The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* was only slightly less exuberant, running the headline "Vegas Looms as Resort Capital with Completion of $3,500,000 Desert Inn", referring to the Los Angeles highway as the "Strip" – capitalized for the first time, but still in quotation marks. The *New Yorker* referred to the Strip without quotation marks: "The lush Las Vegas resorts are scattered along the highway leading from the airport into town, a distance of eight miles. This is known as the Strip." [78]Since its inception when the first resort was built, it took only nine years for the desert area on the Los Angeles Highway to reach adolescence, when it became christened as the Strip.

The Desert Inn was the most sophisticated resort on the Strip so far; it introduced new shapes, a musical fountain, and a technologically advanced showroom and publicity machine to the Strip. Typologically, the Desert Inn was not radically different from the other resorts on the Strip. *The New Yorker* recognized the similarities between the resorts: "There are five major hotel-casinos on the Strip … All are made up of wide-flung low buildings centering on great outdoor swimming pools, and all are surrounded by the vivid green that lavish employment of artesian well-water can produce in the desert."[79] The Desert Inn was consistent with Strip tradition.

Initially, Wayne McAllistar was the designer, but Hugh Taylor, who never finished his architectural education, later replaced him. Like the Thunderbird, the resort had a relatively local theme. It was partly modeled after the Desert Inn in Palm Springs, and partly influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright's Arizona architecture. Nationally known designers, such as Jac Lessmann from New York, worked on the interior, and German born artist, Charles Cobelle, painted the murals.

The Desert Inn was the tallest building on the Strip, the first to reach three stories. The glass-enclosed Skyroom, with electric stars on the ceiling, resembled an airport lookout tower. The building's color pallet - Bermuda pink and trimmed in bright green, with a glistening white tile roof - was highly noticeable. Moreover, a moon-shaped pool, rather than a rectangular-shaped one, was the focal point. Five buildings surrounded the pool in a semi circular arrangement. The pool became a major status symbol for resorts, and designers started to differentiate their size, shape, and layout within the resort. Its freeform sign, designed by YESCO, was also noticeable and mirrored developments in modern art, such as Miró and Calder. [See Image 18] It was used throughout various aspects of the resort, including its menus, souvenirs, and publicity.

Since the Desert Inn was opposite the Last Frontier and its pool, it needed an aquatic counter symbol. The Desert Inn pioneered the first musical fountain on the Strip. An oval fountain, it had the ability to shoot water up to sixty feet in the air, and was night-lit by multi-colored lights and choreographed to music. To maximize its impact, it was placed directly across from the Last Frontier pool. The fountain feature would become a much-repeated element of later resorts, which typically, and wrongfully, claimed theirs as the first on the Strip. The Desert Inn musical fountain would not last long, however; it was removed in a 1963 remodeling.

As an avid gambler, Clark knew how to organize the program in his resort in order to maximize profit. He was very much involved with the design process. He adjusted the designs of the roulette and craps tables so that they would be more convenient for gamblers. Most importantly, he placed gambling so that it was pervasive throughout the resort, and it even invaded other places. For instance, the casino was directly accessible from the lobby and there was a 'Lady Luck Bar' which incorporated gambling in the bar. "The feature of this luxury lounge is a gaily lighted roulette wheel with a nude Lady Luck standing in a niche behind the bar. Every hour on the hour, she spins the wheel and designates a bar stool by number. The occupant automatically wins a prize,"[80] noted the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. Gambling had expanded beyond its traditional sphere of the casino; it now invaded other spaces. The hotel lobby and bar were now under its influence.

Besides perfecting the social organization of experience in his resort to maximize profit, Clark managed demographics in his resort through a series of strategies. Clark thought that golfers would be good gamblers also, so the Desert Inn became the first resort that had an 18-hole championship golf course that eventually even hosted a professional golf tournament. About fifty homes surrounded the golf course, introducing high-end housing in a resort on the Strip. It was now possible to live in a resort. Housing options were further diversified with so-called "Hollywood Suites," luxury hotel rooms with a living room and two bedrooms. Through housing and recreation options, high-end gamblers were attracted.

Clark even took care of his customer's children, or rather; he kept them out of sight. Clark realized that parents could be better gamblers when they are away from their children, so the resort had a Katrina Doll House, a "hotel in a hotel", with its own bedrooms, kitchen, pool,and sunroom, where children could be left under the supervision of a trained staff member. The resort was laid out in such a way, to maximize the gambling interface without potential disruption.

The Desert Inn's impressive showroom and stage enabled a powerful publicity machine. Publicity director Hank Greenspun, the year he would first publish the daily *Las Vegas Sun*, flew in all the major American newspapers and magazines, including *Life* magazine reporters and photographers who ran a story about the lavish opening. Greenspun had managed to spin the opening of the story as a significant news event. A major role in adding to the "news" value of the resort was the Desert Inn's new showroom, which could accommodate the best of performers. Unheard of at the time for a resort hotel, it had seven separate dressing rooms. The stage, accommodating ever more famous and

expensive performers, was as sophisticated as the acts it hosted. The 450-seat showroom, the Painted Desert Room, had a "band car" that "mechanically whisked the orchestra on and off stage in one motion", to make their way for the "chorus cuties" of the show. A Kliegl Brothers control panel, in a light booth 150 feet above stage, orchestrated over 10,000 different lighting effects and electronically controlled the curtains and the band car. A few years later, an elevated platform that could spin and produce ice, rain, and wind was added to the stage. In the face of competition within the upper case Strip, even a resort as advanced as the Desert Inn was forced to continually upgrade itself.

The north side of the Strip was completed with the opening of the Sahara in 1952, the sixth resort on the Strip. Hailed as a "Jewel in the Desert", it was conceived by Milton Prell, a former jeweler from Los Angeles. The Sahara was the first resort to introduce an African theme throughout the resort, the most exotic theme so far. Even though it was taken from another continent, since it was a desert theme, it was considered to fit in well on the Strip. Other exotic deserts would later be invoked as well.

A company run by Ragnar Qvale, an architect, who worked as a set designer, was responsible for carrying out all elements of the theme. It ensured "harmony" across the resort's structural interior, decorative murals, opening announcements, menu covers, and uniforms. "Qvale believes that in a resort show place as complex as the Sahara, it is absolutely essential that all décor, furnishings, and other incidentals, such as menus, uniforms, etc should have a unifying theme,"[81] wrote the *Las Vegas Review-Journal.* [See Image 19] The Sahara's theme was Sub-Saharan Africa, with rooms named "Congo Room" and "Casbah Lounge". "Lifesize models of African warriors, spears held high, flanked the Congo Room entrance, while a desert scene, depicting a nomadic caravan, complete with the now famous Sahara camels, was erected in front of the hotel,"[82] noted Stamos. Moreover, two large camel statues stood in front of the resort. However, the resort's architecture did not convey the African theme literally. The Sahara was a modern interpretation of a theme, just like the Flamingo, Thunderbird, Desert Inn, and the coming Sands would be. Themes, above all, were a marketing technique that covered up that the resorts were all remarkably similar.

The Sands, the seventh resort on the Strip, opened only a few weeks after the Sahara, on December 15, 1952. It opened late because some of its investors had questionable backgrounds, and therefore, they had trouble getting licenses. Wayne McAllistar, its architect, designed an iconic entrance consisting of sharp angled pylons facing the road. According to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, the style was "Bermuda Modern," although Hess rightfully attributed the style more to Los Angeles than Miami. McCallistar had grown to be one of the Googie's style main proponents. The Sands sign mimicked motifs from its architecture. It was the largest sign on the Strip, 56 feet high, and contained the slogan: "A Place in the Sun". [See Image 20]

The Sands was the first resort to reach international acclaim, and even hosted a visit of President-elect Kennedy in 1961. The Sands would become world-famous for being the home of the Rat Pack from the late 50s to the early 60s, celebrity performers, who starred in the movie *Ocean's Eleven* (1960), which depicted the robbery of the Sands. The celebrity performers' entertainment value was as important as their publicity value.

Whether shooting movies or performing, their mere presence in Las Vegas was news for the national media.

The four postwar resorts had further established the reputation of the Strip. Yet, despite the small variations that existed between the hotels following the Flamingo, their typology was hardly different from another. They were color and thematic variations of the solipsistic suburban archetype set by El Rancho. Architectural elements and styles were used as symbols in order to establish a difference in terms of status. It was a difference of packaging, played out through pool shapes, roadside signs, lawns, and architectural finishes. It was the fundamental sameness of resorts that allowed for these variations. The images that these architectural elements evoked were typically taken from popular culture. And when they took more extreme forms, they managed to attract the interest of cultural and architectural critics.

A striking example of the battle of images that unfolded behind a typological similarity was the pool race. *Harper* noticed this race for the most impressive pool: "When Wilbur Clark opened the Desert Inn, in 1950, with a fancy pool, the Last Frontier across the highway promptly filled in its old pool and built a heated one of AAU dimensions with a subsurface observation room at the deep end and a deck-side bar. Whereupon the Desert Inn tore up its brand new pool and dug a bigger one. Then the Sands created a thing of free flow design large enough to float a cruiser. (I'm exaggerating, confessedly. Lake Mead is still larger.)"[83] Symbolic battles did not only confine themselves to signage and themes, but also involved interiors and exteriors, even pools.

With new resorts bringing in new themes, the symbolic capital of existing resorts was quickly devalued. They had no option but to remodel. For example, barely six years after it opened, the Flamingo was forced to remodel, since it had already become outdated. Its initial symbolic advantage was quickly exhausted when new themes were introduced. The most enigmatic part of the renovation was the addition of a "Champagne Tower," a 20-foot wide diameter, 80-foot tall cylinder decorated with neon rings and a revolving top. [See Image 21] It was the tallest freestanding neon sign structure on the Strip and the first Strip "spectacular." Its sizzling presence ignited a race for the most impressive sign.

Besides adding new symbols, existing resorts expanded in a violent way. El Rancho enlarged its casino, in 1953, from 12,500 to 18,000 square feet. The games were not paused; the construction and destruction unfolded in front of the gamblers. "The ceiling was ripped out, great steel girders were hoisted into place, workers swarmed about on catwalks overhead drilling and hammering and plastering. Walls were pushed back, pillars installed, and the *décor* completely altered,"[84] described Best and Hillyer.

As resorts used architectural weapons to battle for customers, the Strip advanced from lower case to upper case. In 1953, seven million visitors visited Las Vegas, and the Strip hosted 1,800 hotel rooms, many of them in the seven major resorts.[85] [See Image 22] The growth of the Strip brought jobs, which led to the growth of Las Vegas. The population of Las Vegas more than doubled between 1950 and 1954, from 24,624 to 47,812. Even though, the Strip might have reached adolescence, it was far from fully-grown.

The capitalization of the Strip did not just imply its reification. The Strip became a separated entity in the region, much like an island in the city: a separated Strip city. The large lots the suburban resorts required, compared to smaller downtown hotel lots, turned the Strip into an isolated island. As a result of the large frontage and lot sizes of the suburban resorts, side streets on the Strip were barely formed, which could have potentially eased access to the corridor. Instead, most of the streets perpendicular to the Strip were car access lanes to resorts, which cut off sidewalks and pedestrians, contributing to the fragmentation of the Strip. The Strip was to be experienced as a unitary element only through a single mode of transportation: the car.

A 1953 *New York Times* article described Las Vegas as it was experienced by car. Driving at night to the gambling metropolis conjured a "sense of unreality… round-the-clock neon's blazing against the dawn like a Times Square gone berserk."[86] Even the *New York Times* writer had realized that Las Vegas had topped the "Great White Way". But above all, it was the Strip, and not downtown, that attracted attention. Another *New York Times* writer noted the difference between the Strip and downtown, noting that Fremont Street "is a fairly humdrum small-town main-drag, although spiced with a half-dozen gaudy gambling halls and ubiquitous slot machines which housewives yank with one hand as they clutch their groceries in the other. But along the 'Strip,' on the edge of town, the traveler plunges into a never-never land of exotic architecture, extravagant vegetation, flamboyant signery and frenetic diversion."[87] While downtown was stuck in its Wild West mold, plus constraint in its physical expansion, the Strip was thriving with exotic images, sprawling at will.

2.2.3 The Booming Crisis

The height of the first building boom on the Strip occurred in 1955. Although the new resorts desperately tried to allure the public with new images and features, they caused a saturation of the market. The peak of the boom coincided with an economic crisis, in which many resorts were struggling. Resorts learned that instead of mere thematic variations, whether Outer Space, Medieval Modern, or Arabian, they would have to go after "real" diversification, by tapping into different markets on both the low end and high end of the consumer spectrum.

1955 saw the completion of no less than three new casinos – the Royal Nevada, the Dunes, and the Riviera – as well as a major conversion: The New Frontier. Intensified competition led to the introduction of two enigmatic signs, a space-age theme, and, importantly, the first high-rise on the Strip. "Las Vegas Playground USA", a book that came out at the peak of the boom, summed up the dynamic atmosphere: "There is never a moment, on the Strip, that facades aren't being lifted, casinos enlarged, cocktail lounges lengthened, rooms added…. So inexhaustible is the tourist traffic to Las Vegas that new hotels no sooner open their floors to the public than they are obliged to inaugurate expansion programs."[88]

As a result of new competition, the Last Frontier was forced to upgrade. "For the past few years, the Frontier has been the stepchild of the fabulous Strip, watching new and more

modern hostelries go up around her,"[89] wrote the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. It introduced a new theme to the Strip: space age.

Atomic imagery had become an important part of popular culture in the whole country, after the first televised broadcast of a nuclear detonation on United States' soil on April 22, 1952. Since Nevada became a nuclear testing ground in 1951, and detonations within the state were visible from Las Vegas, Las Vegas became the epicenter of this phenomenon. Miss Atomic Bomb beauty contests and Atomic Cocktail parties were held. Findlay claims that Las Vegas tried to compensate for its bad name and, specifically, its mafia image, by capitalizing on this opportunity and taking an anti-communist and militant stance.[90] In 1957, the News Bureau publicized the famous Miss Atomic Bomb image, eternalizing the symbolic connection between Las Vegas, the atomic bomb, and the female body, allegedly the winner of a 1957 beauty contest. [See Image 23] It would be the most famous image that ever publicized Las Vegas. The city's Chamber of Commerce even printed a special calendar with the times of the detonations and the places from which to watch them so that people could plan a holiday that included a nuclear explosion.[91]

On April 5, 1955, the Last Frontier closed and reopened as the New Frontier later that same day. The two million dollar "Big Switch" was an extensive architectural upgrade to the resort. "Switching from rustic western to ultra futuramic architecture and décor, the Last Frontier will drop its slogan 'The Old West I Modern Splendor' for a more apropo[s] tag 'Out of This World' as will it switch to a new name – the New Frontier Hotel."[92]The Wild West aesthetics, Texas cattle horns, saddle-shaped stools and bullet-holed mahogany bars were exchanged for a Los Angeles imported space age theme. [See Image 24] The design was ultramodern: futuristic images of little men in space, planets and asteroids prevailed throughout the resort. A 120-foot long bar stood in a "Cloud 9 Lounge". "There has probably never been a more violent transmogrification in *décor* in the history of hotel construction … Chandeliers in the shape of men from outer space, flying saucers and spinning planets hung from raspberry *glacé* and daphne pink ceilings. Walls of diadem violet and Ruby Lake magenta displayed three-dimensional amethyst murals depicting the twelve signs of the zodiac,"[93] wrote Best and Hillyer that same year. In addition to the interior design upgrade, 250 rooms and 250 apartment suites were added, as well as a new sign, a 126-foot trylon, which was the highest marquee on the Strip. Designed by YESCO, its lights provided continuously changing effects on the façade: "The lighting will be controlled by a cyclorama dimmer, bathing the front of the building in horizontal colors of the spectrum, with the 126 foot trylon projecting vertical hues, simultaneously, forming magical patterns on the black and pink striped terrazzo deck…".[94]After the New Frontier introduced the space-age theme, miniature satellites, planets, and rockets mushroomed on the Strip.

The conversion was emblematic of the atomic age Las Vegas participated in. "It was a monument to the Atomic Age and the fervor of Sputnik and the space race,"[95] noted Stamos. Findlay recognized the upgrade as a turning point of the Strip and the West in general. "The conversion from Last Frontier to New Frontier, from small, woodsy, auto court to large, garish, resort hotel, exemplified the dramatic changes that Las Vegas underwent after World War II."[96] The Las Vegas Strip now represented the future; the

sky was the limit in the new frontier. Las Vegans were optimistic about their role. “Las Vegas is unquestionably the new frontier of America,”[97] affirmed the *Las Vegas Review-Journal.* Judging from the string of new resort openings, there was reason for optimism. Only two weeks after the Big Switch was unveiled, the Royal Nevada, the eighth resort on the Strip, was inaugurated.

Although the Royal Nevada was the first resort to take a theme from an invented medieval Nevadan past, with Arthurian lettering spelling “Royal Nevada” and a 23-carat gold leaf crown on a tower, it merely evoked the past as an image in which to wrap the most modern and technologically advanced. [See Images 25 and 26] The Royal Nevada, “Home of the Dancing Waters”, was the permanent home of the traveling Dancing Waters, a musical fountain which previously performed at West Berlin Industrial Exhibition and the Radio City Music Hall. [See Images 27 and 28] Otto Przystawic created the Dancing Waters in the 1930s in Germany. He was the first to conceive of the idea of having a fountain recreate the gracefulness of ballet. The Przystawic shows were unique because water could revolve, as well as sway, which made them appear much like real dancers.

The musical fountain at the Royal Nevada was so spectacular that it was instantly reified. “Heavyweight Star to Make Nightly Shows Attractive,” headlined the *Las Vegas Review-Journal.* “This exclusive attraction is the ‘Dancing Waters,’ a dazzling symphonic fountain display of steel pipe, 19 electric motors, 4,000 jets, 50,000 watts of power, and 48 tons of water,” it continued. More than a fountain, it was a technological star - a mechanical reproduction of a chorus of ballet dancers, which actually performed *on stage*. “With the luster of sparkling gems, the vibrating cascading waters from various shapes and weave picturesque patterns, keeping time with Jerry Fielding’s inimitable music. This spectacular European invention can shoot water 20 to 50 feet in the air to form limitless combinations of contours and colors. The ‘Pipe Organ Ballet,’ ‘Water Curtain,’ ‘Magic Flowercades,’ Color Cataraci,’ and the ‘Amazing Dancing Waters’ where the water actually dances to waltztime music, are just a few of the fantastic effects,”[98] wrote the *Las Vegas Review-Journal.* The architectural feature was so spectacular that it rivaled real performers on stage, with the difference that it did not rely on nudity. “It is the only successful act in Las Vegas devoid of sex appeal,”[99] noted a local newspaper. Yet despite banking on people’s technology fetish, the Royal Nevada would soon be relegated to being a mere historical fact. However, the theme of the medieval age, as well as the dancing waters, would recur in the future.

The building boom caused the ninth resort on the Strip, the Riviera, to break with the low-rise, bungalow style tradition. “The new boom has brought one new departure – skyscraper hotels instead of the one-and-two-story tradition that characterizes the entire community. The new Riviera will be nine stories – by report, a smaller version of the new fourteen-story Fontainebleau at Miami Beach,”[100] reported the *New York Times* in a 1955 article that was headlined “The ‘Sure Thing’ Boom at Las Vegas”.

The nine-story Riviera was the first high rise on the Strip. Since land on the Strip was getting more expensive, it made sense for developers to build up into the sky. However, the densification of the Strip did not lead to the Strip becoming more urban. The Riviera

was still a suburban, internally oriented resort. Even more detached from the Strip because of its verticality, it did not give back to the city except for an image of urbanity.

The fact that Riviera was the first high-rise on the Strip was celebrated in its publicity and the resort's slogan, "The Riviera: A New High in the Las Vegas Sky". [See Image 29] The height of the resort made up for the lack of a clear theme. Even though the Riviera made literal references to Europe – with each floor named after a different city in the Riviera, including Cannes, Nice and Monaco – from the outside, the Riviera looked like a typical modern high rise. And while in a denser city than Las Vegas, the Riviera would have been demoted to a mere mid-rise in the context of the Strip, it easily stuck out. The Riviera radically transformed the skyline of the Las Vegas Strip. "A motorist driving into Las Vegas in 1955 would have noticed a striking difference in the Strip's low-slung silhouette. In the distance, rising skyward from the sagebrush and sand, a new hotel was jutting heavenward," wrote Stamos. The sheer superior size of the building was enough to attract attention; neither exotic themes nor signage was necessary to bring in people. The Riviera preceded future resorts to come; eventually, neon signage, in addition to themes, ceded to the height and mass of the high-rise.

Resort developers were running out of new themes on the Las Vegas Strip. Space Age, Native American, European, Medieval, and the Saharan themes had already been used. The Dunes, the tenth resort on the Strip, decided to elaborate on an already existing theme, that of the foreign desert, but to pick a more mysterious one than the Sahara: the Arabian Desert. Nicknamed "Miracle in the Desert," it was "a 20th Century version of the legendary Baghdad of the Arabian Nights."[101] [See Image 30] Once the Dunes had introduced this Arabian theme, future and existing resorts would mimic it.

The theme was expressed best in a new enigmatic sign on the Strip designed by YESCO. [See Images 31 and 32] "A scene out of the Arabian Nights dazzles the eve in the person of a dashing, handsome sheik of old Baghdad, a sculptured, vividly colored figure who stands 30 feet high from plume tip to toe, white teeth flashing the diamond in his turban (in reality a gem-cut oversized automobile headlight) sparkling brilliant. He stands amid rolling sand dunes arms akimbo, his midnight – blue cape falling gracefully from his shoulders. In the distance, half hidden among the rolling dunes, the domes and minarets of two fabled cities of the Thousand and One nights are seen,"[102] wrote the *Las Vegas Review-Journal.* The sign was so spectacular that it rivaled the Flamingo's champagne tower.

With the Dunes extending the Strip further south, and the Riviera extending it up into the sky, the Strip was becoming overbuilt. For the first time after the Second World War, the market was saturated; there were more rooms than tourists. Some hotels, especially the new ones, were losing millions. It was obvious that the boom, catapulted by incredible profits in which some casinos made a return on investment with 3 months, was approximating its end. The main obituary came from *Life* magazine, which featured a Moulin Rouge showgirl on the cover of June 20, 1955, issue, headlined: "Las Vegas – Is Boom Overextended?" [See Image 33] The article indicated that the question of overextension was "asked mostly by the newer hotels",[103] which rang true to some extent. The Riviera went bankrupt just three months after opening, but would re-open. The Royal

Nevada would permanently close its curtains; its musical fountain probably migrated to the Desert Inn. Finally, the Dunes, despite its V-shaped swimming pool that could be frozen in winter to double as an ice-skating rink, closed one year after its opening. However, it would re-open in 1957, adding a brand new feature out of desperation; the first bare-breasted showgirls on the Strip, the "Minsky's Follies". Of course, it was presented under a European theme, as an exotic excuse for nudity that would otherwise be interpreted as vulgar. The show drew big crowds; casino operators would never forget the effect nudity had on visitor volume. The Minsky's were the first in a race of the follies. Lifesavers now, once mimicked by others, they could no longer withhold resorts from drowning.

The height of the boom made apparent the limit to spectacular architecture. With new themes entering the Strip, the race for the newest and the most had mostly led to exhaustion. Even though no less than eight million tourists visited Las Vegas in 1956, and spent $160 million, the market was saturated, and this particularly challenged the newcomers. It was clear that resorts had to diversify beyond images if they were to attract more visitors post-boom; they had to tap into new markets. By marketing to those on both the high and low end of the market, resorts could enlarge the typical Strip visitor demographic.

2.2.4 Post Boom Diversification

Pressured by the oversupply crisis, new resorts were forced to diversify; the three casinos that followed the boom all tapped into a different market. The Hacienda targeted families, the Tropicana high-end customers and the Stardust the middle-class and conventioneers. New marketing techniques were able to attract these demographics, and included the vacation package, far away billboards, and façades that doubled as signs. The new masses that these resorts were able to reel in made the Strip increasingly popular; however, after their construction the market became so saturated that no new resorts were constructed for a period of almost nine years.

The Hacienda, the fourth in a string of Hacienda Hotels in California, opened doors in 1956. Departing from other casinos on the Strip, it did not go after affluent singles, but instead actively pursuing families. Contrary to common belief, families were targeted this early in the history of the Strip. "It was in the 1950s at the Hacienda, and not at Circus Circus in the 1970s or in the family-friendly campaign of the 1990s, that Las Vegas first appealed to families,"[104] assert Moehring and Green. Although the Last Frontier Village preceded the Hacienda in terms of catering to families, the Hacienda was entirely modeled for the demographic. The resort had a miniature golf and go-cart racing and multiple swimming pools, including the largest one on the Strip in the shape of a yet untried letter of the alphabet, a "Z". Floodlights were added to the 3-par golf course so it could be used at night. Conform Strip tradition, the Hacienda used its architectural program as a marketing techniques. But since the Hacienda was located on the furthest part of the south side of the Strip, it could not rely on pedestrian traffic, and was forced to be inventive in its marketing strategies, that made the resort visible and accessible from afar.

The Hacienda pioneered the vacation package – the "Hacienda Holiday". Customers only paid $16 for food and accommodation, and they received $10 in casino chips upon arrival. It set a new trend, pursuant to which luxury accommodation could be offered to the masses, as losses on hotel rooms and food were offset by casino profits. The Hacienda also introduced the all-inclusive package to the Strip, when it bought a DC-3 aircraft to pick up customers. Later, a DC-4 was added, which was outfitted with furnishings to the tune of $95,000, including a piano bar. It even hosted provocative fashion shows with scantily dressed cow-girls and Indians. The package deal was so popular that by 1962, the casino had a fleet of thirty airplanes and a helicopter, which transported more than 150,000 customers that year alone. Some people joked that the resort's fleet of aircraft was bigger than that of the Cuban air force. [See Image 34]

Another marketing novelty pioneered by the Hacienda was to advertise the vacation package on billboards along the highway as far as Victorville and Barstow, in full view of the thousands of cars headed east on Route 66. When it turned out this marketing method was quite successful, many more would follow. Initially, signs on the Strip were situated in close physical proximity of the resorts they referred to. By increasing the spatial distance between the signifier and signified, people could be lured from far away. It was even suggested that the separation between the two increased the desire for a visit proportionally, by presenting that what is attainable but beyond immediate reach. "The fact that the sign may be thousands of miles from the resort it advertises adds to the piquancy of the invitation, and there can be little doubt that many who see it have their interest stirred to the point that they resolve, if they ever get that far west, to look the place over,"[105] noted an observer in 1963.

Especially in the 1970s, the Los Angeles Highway, and particularly the Strip, would be congested with type of billboards. It led Baudrillard and Eco to theorize the congestion of signs as a hyperreality, and Las Vegas as an advertising city, a postmodern city of signs. They argued that the landscape of billboards was such an omnipresent and dominant visual entity, and its messages so seductive, that it began to stop referring to, and substitute for, the real referent.

The twelfth resort on the Strip, the Caribbean themed Tropicana, opened in 1957. It differentiated itself from other resorts by presenting itself as more elegant and exclusive, which led to its nickname "the Tiffany of the Strip". "Unlike many other Strip layouts, the Tropicana was designed and built as a resort hotel, not as a casino and night club with incidental guest rooms," noted the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.[106] Its founder Ben Jaffe, partner and operator of the Fountainebleau Hotel in Miami, wanted to model it after the plush resorts in the Caribbean. The Tropicana established a tradition for resorts that wished to appeal to the upper class, and introduced three architectural innovations that lent the resort exclusivity: peacock alleys, a Y-shape, and the vertical separation between front and back of house. The Tropicana perfected the spatialization of exclusivity; it managed to organize experience in such a way the resort could position itself on the very high end of the market.

Breaking with casino resort tradition, the lobby, entrance, and room corridors were shielded off from the casino floor by "peacock alleys", corridors that bypass the casino

floor and go straight to the rooms, ensuring a more silent and elegant atmosphere for up-scale customers. Moreover, the Tropicana is credited for introducing Y-shape typology on the Strip. [See Image 35] “In the stem of the “Y”, there are tremendous lobby-lounge areas unmatched in the West, spacious casino, elongated serpentine bar, cocktail lounge, a spectacular Theatre – Restaurant, two other breathtaking dining rooms, and several shops, while the wings of the “Y” incorporate 300 luxurious rooms and suites,”[107] described the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. The Y-shape is an effective typology for resorts, since it strikes a balance between room views and room density. In a Y-shape, all of the rooms have an outside view of at least 120 degrees, while at the same time, greater square footage can be achieved than, for instance, a candy bar shape. From an urban point of view, however, the Y-shape is far from ideal, since it does not relate to the surrounding streets on the Strip. The “Y” is non-directional, inwardly oriented towards its stem. A “Y”’ does not align with a line, such as a strip. However, the Y-shape would be adopted by future, even more solipsistic resorts, which would extrude the shape further into the air. Finally, Miami architect Sherman separated public functional areas from utility spaces in the Tropicana. The kitchen, bakery, liquor room, linen rooms, and employee facilities were placed on the lower floor, where they would be invisible to guests. This functional separation would more effectively hide the back of house; it divided the giant underworld production from tourists, preventing a possible encroachment of the realities of production on the front of house phantasmagoria.

The $15 million spent on Tropicana, a new Strip record, accounted for the following symbolic features. In front of the resort, amid tropical gardens that were lit at night, stood a 60-foot tulip-shaped fountain, continuing on the tradition that had started with the Desert Inn. Phil Kastel, initially in charge of casino operations, used to brag to his guests that the air-conditioning system could “cool over a 1,000 Death Valley homes in mid-summer, that enough concrete was poured in building to create a 40-mile long freeway and that the paging and music system could be heard underwater in the resort's pool.”[108] Indeed, as a response to frozen and letter-shaped pools, the Tropicana introduced Muzak to the only place in which it was not yet piped: underwater. Yet, the technological advancement and gallons of concrete only suggested permanence; the resort would not last long in its initial phase.

The Stardust, the twelfth resort on the Strip, mass-produced the suburban resort experience on the Strip, which it advertised commensurately: the sign doubled as façade. Tony “Admiral” Cornero conceived of the Stardust. Cornero gained his nickname whilst overseeing the transfer of alcohol from ships to smaller crafts headed for the Southern Californian coaches during prohibition. He died an honorable gambler’s death, just before his resort neared completion, while he was playing crabs. “He had crapped out,” wrote reporter Bob Holdorf of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* the following day.

The Stardust helped the Las Vegas Strip become even more popular. Built right at the heart of the Strip, it had more than 1,065 rooms, making it the largest resort in the world, especially when it swallowed up the Royal Nevada. Its rooms were laid in five parallel two-story shaped bars with rooms on both sides, and parking lots in between. [See Image 36] Unlike the Tropicana, there was no money spent on landscaping or views. The

Stardust managed to fill its rooms by appealing to the masses rather than the well-heeled, charging only $6 a day per room - at least half the price of other resorts.

The only architectural element Cornero spent money on was the sign of his resort, which, in a full convergence of architecture and publicity, was incorporated in a large portion of the façade. It attributed the Stardust's space-age theme and was huge: "Weighing 129 tons, the sign is 216 feet long and 37 feet high. Installation utilized 32,000 feet of wiring, 7100 feet of neon tubing and 11,000 incandescent lamps. Over 84 gallons of automotive enamels were used in painting the sign. The dimensional world in the center of the sign is 16 feet high, weighs over 2 tons, is indirectly lighted and has a restless 'sputnik' in constant motion around it."[109] [See Image 37] The sign was so bright that it could be seen three miles away, forcing other developers to enter a race for the biggest and brightest neon. It also functioned as an invaluable picture opportunity. "At the base of this panel is a rocket device which undoubtedly will prove to be the most photographed items in the area. Here, tourists can be pictured against a background simulating the Moon's surface. It is unique, unusual, and compelling."[110] Tourists visiting Las Vegas would go home with a photograph forever eternalizing the bond with Stardust, as well as providing free mantelpiece-style publicity. Only if architecture was spectacular enough, it would self-diffuse automatically. Yet no amount of light bulbs could guarantee future success. For it to keep up with development, it would have to keep topping itself. And so, within seven years, the sign would be remodeled.

The Stardust imported the French "Lido de Paris", the first large stage production in Las Vegas that rivaled with Broadway. The stage of the Stardust's showroom was instantly glorified. "The star of the Lido in Las Vegas was not a person, but was rather the mammoth Café Continental Stage,"[111] noted Stamos. "In most places the acts made the lounge, but the Starlight Lounge made the acts!"[112] said Frank Bella, the 400-seat room manager. The stage was divided in five parts and built upon six hydraulic lifts that could move over a height of 40 feet. It could drop the stage 30 feet below street level, where scene changes could be made quickly. "Each unit can carry the weight of an elephant and can be manipulated with the rapidity of an eye,"[113] wrote the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. Weighing 65,000 pounds, the moving parts provided stair step effects above stage, and could easily make the entire chorus disappear, as well as giant-sized objects, such as a replica of the Titanic. The stage enabled the artificial production of rain, snow and ice in the desert; it featured a swimming tank, an ice-skating rink, a rain curtain and a snow-making machine. Donn Arden, the stage-master, knew well how to take advantage of the technological features. He had been hired by the Lido Club producers to stage the original production in Paris in 1947. Arden would later be considered "a Las Vegas legend", "the unquestioned master of the staged spectacular", having "conceived and produced such incredible staged disasters as the sinking of the Titanic, the explosion of the Hindenburg, the San Francisco earthquake, a dam bursting, and the explosion of Mt. Fuji."[114] Already on the opening night, he fully exploited the stage's possibilities: "It starred Jacqueline De Bief and featured an ice show, a Neapolitan street scene, a 'Promenade of European Beauties,' and a fireworks display from the top of a replica of the Eiffel Tower."[115] [See Image 38] Yet, the real attraction was perhaps the incorporation of bare breasted girls in the stage production. The Stardust had to compete with the Dunes, and in 1959, Tropicana added to the rivalry, by importing the Folies

Bergere. Now three French revues competed on the Strip. Finally, if the Lido in Las Vegas had pioneered anything, it was the scenes it had brought to Las Vegas visitors, which would resurface in slightly more permanent forms. It would take three decades for an Eiffel Tower, an erupting volcano, and Mediterranean street scenes, to actually get built on the Strip.

The Stardust, together with the Hacienda, managed to further popularize Las Vegas. They attracted the "average American" to Las Vegas; as a result, Las Vegas shed some of its stigma derived from the presence of gambling and mafia. In 1961, the *Saturday Evening Post* noted the following about Las Vegas: "Family trade, limited until recently, is increasing. A few years ago, most visitors were 'up-and-backers,' in from California for the night. Now nearly half come from everywhere else. Vegas is considered respectable. TV spectaculars originate here. Columnists value the dateline. Banks and insurance companies lend money to casinos."[116] Moreover, the Stardust, because of its size, was specifically suited to accommodate and house large conventions. This proved to be especially lucrative after the newly established Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority opened the Las Vegas Convention Center in 1959. To the benefit of Strip casinos, it was located right on the Las Vegas Strip. The center helped Las Vegas tap into the burgeoning convention industry, allowing it to fill rooms during the week. By solving the mid-week problem, resorts could grow even further. Finally, more Americans found their way to Vegas after the new Interstate-15 Highway between Los Angeles and Salt Lake City, which passed by the Strip, was completed.

Despite the newfound popularity of – and easier access to – the Strip, no new resort construction would occur on the Strip for some time. Instead, additions kept being built. The Stardust, with its massive number of rooms, initiated an 8-year hiatus on new resort construction: with the opening of the Stardust, the first building period of the Strip came to an end.

During the first building period on the Strip, which started with the El Rancho and ended with the Stardust, the Las Vegas Strip achieved nearly full suburbanization. At the same time, Las Vegas grew from a small tourist town to America's first metropolis. The increase in tourism had provided many service jobs, causing immense growth in Las Vegas as a whole. Already by the 1960 census, the region qualified as a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area; the Las Vegas Metropolitan Area registered more than 112,000 residents in 1960. [117] Only 55 years after its inception, the Las Vegas Valley was the United State's first and only 20th century metropolis. Most of the Strip was lined with a diversity of resorts, each representing thematic variations of a suburban solipsistic archetype. [See Image 39] The Strip started as a connector to downtown at first – as the Los Angeles Highway – until it got promoted to becoming a destination – the Las Vegas Strip. The moment the Los Angeles Highway turned into the Las Vegas Strip, a postmodern reversal occurred between the peripheral suburban strip and the downtown core.

The reason for the success of the Strip lied in its suburbanization, as a technology of separation as well as a spectacle. The Strip flourished by segregating that what was morally questionable from the residential areas of those who desired it. At the same time,

the suburbanization of the Strip at the cost of downtown mimicked a national trend in which middle class families abandoned downtown and the perceived problems there, to start a new life in an area that was separated, yet still in proximity of the city: suburbia. As a technology of separation, suburbanization was also conducive to the production of consumer subjects. Was residential suburbanization a way to entice mass consumption of consumer goods that were deemed necessary in a single-family household, the suburbanization of gambling allowed for the orchestration of environments more conducive to gambling. By atomizing people, containing them in isolated suburban resorts, they would be more inclined to gamble.

Suburbanization was turned into a spectacle as well. While the suburbanization of the Strip fundamentally separated and isolated, resorts still needed to present a public façade to attract people, and to set the resort's status. The architectural elements put on display were fundamentally suburban, such as the roadside sign, pool, lawn, and driveway. These elements established the difference between resorts that were fundamentally the same. [See Image 40] Because of the competition, and because many of the architects were unconstrained by a formal architectural education, these elements grew larger and more eccentric, incorporating images from popular culture.

It is this duplicity – on one hand the tendency towards isolation, on the other hand the need for extraversion – that allowed for the Strip to become an interesting public space. For spectacle to work, it cannot be contained. And as it diffuses, other resorts will benefit from it. This is one of the reasons of the success of the Strip. Resorts, rather than fully isolating themselves from another, could have set up shop in a totally different area. Yet, they benefitted from another's physical proximity. While suburbanization attempted to separate, the spectacle of the suburb crossed over to unify an area called the Strip, in which others could enjoy the sights of neon signage, landscaped gardens, and elaborate pools, for free.

Eventually, when the spectacle of the suburb grew more eccentric, the Strip caught the interest of cultural and architectural theorists. Initially, the architectural establishment showed little interest in Las Vegas. A city like Las Vegas, as it expanded along the Las Vegas Strip, was considered a "roadtown," denounced by Lewis Mumford in 1962. He described such a city as "an incoherent and purposeless urbanoid nonentity, which dribbles over the devastated landscape and destroys the coherent smaller centers of urban or village life that stands in its path:"[118] an "anti-city". Although less condemning views appeared, they represented a minority. "It's significance for trouble – aesthetic, social, economic – are as great as its potentialities for good, and indeed it is this ambidexterity which gives the highway and its margins so much significance an fascination,[119] wrote J.B. Jackson, seeing potential mainly in the "fantastic beauty of any neon lighted strip after dark".[120] [See Image 41] A decade after Jackson, architectural theorists would be mesmerized by the neon spectacle as well.

Although little is left from this era today, traces are abundant. El Rancho burned down suspiciously in 1960; the New Frontier was demolished for the Frontier in 1967; and Doby Doc moved his collectibles to his warehouses overnight, discontent with new ownership. The Dunes, Desert Inn, Sands, Hacienda, and Stardust all have been

dramatically imploded. Perhaps the only physical structure still visible on the current Las Vegas Strip is the Riviera tower, which now lies engulfed by much larger towers of the resort. But above all, the first building boom set the blueprint for the future of the Strip. Until today, resorts are fundamentally solipsistic, and tend to isolate individuals in order to maximize the interface with gambling. Even though the Strip might later appear as urban, it is fundamentally suburban. The Strip as a whole still lies isolated in the city, and the segregation between workers and tourists has only increased on the Strip, with back-of-houses carefully kept out of sight. Finally, many architectural ingredients introduced in the first building boom would resurface in some way or another. Until today, roadside signage, landscaped gardens, elaborate pools, musical fountains, replica and miniature architecture, and Arabian, European, Medieval, and modern themes, still have a place on the Strip.

Finally, as the Strip achieved full suburbanization, the first phase of one of the Strip's metamorphoses came to an end. In a period of only 17 years, it was transformed from a dusty little road to a lush Hollywood playground, characterized by a string of low-rise structures fronted by a large neon sign. But above the horizon, the Riviera high-rise and the Flamingo's brimming champagne tower signaled the new building period to come. Yet the blueprint of the Las Vegas Strip had been set. The Strip is nothing more than a series of solipsistic suburban enclaves, strung around a motorway, craving for attention.

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Chapter Three: From Pop to Modern: The Corporatization of the Strip (1964–1984)

3.1 Pop City
3.1.1 Towering Signs of the Vernacular
3.1.2 Theme Totality

3.2 Corporate Modern
3.2.1 The Mass of Megaresorts
3.2.2 Hyperreal Logo Land

"Just as the accumulation of commodities mass-produced for the abstract space of the market shattered all regional and legal barriers and all the Medieval guild restrictions that maintained the quality *of craft production, it also undermined the autonomy and quality of* places. *This homogenizing power is the heavy artillery that has battered down all the walls of China."* [1]

- Guy Debord. Society of the Spectacle, "Thesis 165"

During the second Las Vegas building boom, the Strip morphed stylistically, from pop to modern, and typologically, from low-rise bungalow to high-rise megaresort. At the start of the boom, tall eccentric neon signage defined much of the experience; the architecture liad subdued. By the end of the boom, architecture had struck back with a vengeance, and massive megaresorts, fronted by a sea of whiteboard corporate logos, now defined the Strip.

I claim that underneath this change lay a transformation of the financial structure: from Mafia and Teamster pension funds to corporate financing. Teamster pensions had found a commensurate architectural expression in the spectacle of pop, until corporate financing took over, and the spectacle of corporatism prevailed. As the Strip was being corporatized, a process of growth, normalization, and modernization started. National and international operating corporations homogenized their hotels, while ironing out the peculiarities of the pop era. Because corporations were new on the Strip, and because they needed to disassociate themselves from the mafia and corrupt Teamsters, they conformed to the dominant architectural style of corporations in the United States after WWII: international style modernism. The corporate modern aesthetics plus the larger resort plant introduced by the corporations devalued the Pop City casino complexes to provincial and small. After the Strip reached its pinnacle of eccentricity during the mid 1960s, corporate money led to the demise of the golden age of the sign.

Above all, the shift was visible in the signage. During the first phase of the second building boom, fueled by Teamster pension funds, signs took over commensurate popular

imagery and were getting increasingly large and elaborate. Corporations, in contrast, brought in their standard corporate logos. In addition, they introduced the megaresort, an even more introverted resort typology. The new regime of capital overthrew the eccentric architecture that was associated with the Mafia and the corrupt leadership of the Teamsters, and introduced a new, more austere aesthetic, that combined with the introverted resort type made the Strip a less exciting place. After the Strip reached its pinnacle of eccentricity during the mid 1960s, corporate money led to the demise of the golden age of the sign.

The two styles of signage were theorized in almost diametrically opposite ways. Venturi had initially appreciated the Pop City signage as a relief from modernism's disregard for symbolism in architecture. Eco, and particularly Baudrillard, had a different conception of the sign, one that was essentially an ideology critique of capitalism. Not coincidentally, they critiqued the Las Vegas after Venturi had visited the city, when it had already become corporate. They were critical of corporate logos and advertising, which, they claimed, created a condition of "hyperreality": a homogenizing world of floating signifiers from which it is impossible to distinguish the real.

In short, during the second building boom on the Strip, Las Vegas transitioned from the spectacle of pop, or the individualized vernacular logo, to the spectacle of the corporate modernism, or the homogenized logo. It went accompanied with a different conception of the sign: from an appreciation of the contemporary vernacular, to the despair of the hyperreal. At the same time, while the resorts of the first phase represented paradigmatic postmodern forms, and the corporate casino complexes in the second phase took a high modernist shell, they were still essentially postmodern in experience. Like all casino complexes, they attempted to disorient and isolate their visitors.

3.1 Pop City

The first phase of the second building boom on the Strip is best described as "pop". Fueled by a new source of money, Teamster Pension Funds, the Strip turned into a landscape of towering signs expressing popular forms. Capital of common people had built a commensurate architecture that was an expression of popular culture. There were two essential characteristics of the Pop era of the Strip: eccentric signage and highly thematic architecture. When the pop phase reached its maturity, it caught the attention of architectural and urban theorists, who theorized the Strip first from an anti-modernist perspective – as the quintessential Pop City – and later as a site of postmodern forms.

New economic conditions provided for the Pop City architecture. The mafia phase of financing was coming to an end, unable to provide the large amounts of capital required to enter the resort market on the Strip. Ironically, while the state tried to limit mafia ownership, it caused the mob-connected Teamster Pension Funds to be the only source of capital. After U.S. Senator Estes Kefauver's committee visited Las Vegas in 1950, making the link between the Mafia and the Strip visible to a mass audience, the state had to clean up its image. Nevada feared that another federal investigation could potentially threaten its lucrative tax revenues from the gambling industry. As a result, in 1955, the Nevada Gaming Control Board was founded, which would regulate the casinos more strictly. The new regulations demanded every stockowner to be licensed. However, they

had an adverse effect; they effectively blocked publicly owned companies from owning casinos. Because companies traded on Wall Street can have an infinite number of constantly changing stockowners, it was virtually impossible for corporations to engage in the gambling industry. The only company able to circumvent this regulation was the publicly traded Del Webb Corporation, which merged with the Sahara-Nevada Corporation in 1961. Through an ingenious construction, it set up an operating company, the Consolidate Casino Corporation, which "leased" the Sahara. It operated the casino in exchange for rent, which happened to match the gaming revenue. It was the first time a publicly traded company would get into the Las Vegas resort industry. But besides this unique case, Teamster money, rather than corporate capital, would become the only source of capital available on the Strip. And the Teamsters were run by the equally corrupt, mob-connected boss, James "Jimmy" Hoffa.

The new financial resources of the Teamsters far outstripped the cash available during the "shoebox phase of mob financing",[2] describes Rothman, "when mobsters reached under their beds for shoeboxes of cash."[3] Of course, Teamster pockets were not as deep as corporate capitalists, but for the Strip to become corporatized, this new Nevada legislature, as well as the stigma attached to the gambling industry that existed on Wall Street, had to be overcome. The Teamsters Central States Pension Fund, a union for truck drivers and warehouse workers in the Midwest and the South, got its money from each member paying a two-dollar monthly fee in a pension fund, which would be invested in low-rate real estate loans. Thanks to Hoffa's connections, almost a quarter of its $1 billion loans would go to Las Vegas. From 1958 to 1977, the fund provided a total of $240 million of low-interest loans to Las Vegas casino developers. Many of these funds were used for resort expansions. In 1958, the Dunes received the Teamster's first loan of $4 million. The Stardust received a $6 million loan in 1960. Teamster Pension funds played a decisive role in realizing the new resorts in the second Las Vegas building boom, financing the Aladdin, Caesars Palace, the Landmark, and Circus Circus.

In addition to the Teamsters, other unions were equally important in the building of Las Vegas. Moehring points out the fact that the unions played a crucial role in the success of Las Vegas. There was not a major hotel strike until 1976; the building trade unions were relatively quiet and so were the Teamsters.[4] Moreover, many resorts preferred hiring union members in order to weed out the divorcees, who were looking for a job while fulfilling their residency requirement. Unions would provide the steady and reliable source of labor the resorts needed in order to grow. Their influence was equally visible in the populist style the architecture of the Strip took. Backed by Teamster Pension Funds, during the mid-1960s the Strip turned into a landscape of towering eccentric signs, and resorts inspired by images taken from popular culture that were taken almost literally and to the extreme.

The sky was the limit during the Teamster days on the Strip, with new signs popping up on the Strip, each breaking record heights. The intense competition between resorts on the Strip, desperate for attention, forced neon signage to become increasingly bigger and more elaborate. It disrupted the relationship between the signs and the buildings they referred to. Some of the signs rivaled the buildings; others unified them; some buildings

even took over the aesthetic of the sign. Neon signage defined much of the experience on the Strip.

These signs captured the interest of cultural, urban, and architectural theorists, who celebrated the signage as a new cultural high point. They were interested in the Strip as a cultural expression of the prole, a high-tech environment, and a semiotic system that destabilized the relationships between signage and architecture. Writer Tom Wolfe brought the “electrifying architecture” of Las Vegas to the attention of architectural theorists, including Banham, Archigram, Scott-Brown, and Venturi, who, like Wolf, celebrated the architecture of the Las Vegas Strip, which they considered vernacular, a naïve attempt at representation by the people. To them, it offered a relief from the cultural forms of the status quo, making Las Vegas the ultimate “pop” city: a neon vernacular icon of postmodernism, an obligatory stop for every student of architecture.

3.1.1 Towering Signs of the Vernacular

The Pop City era started with a significant event: the erection of the new Dunes sign in 1964. The sign was 180 feet tall, the largest freestanding electric sign in the world. [See Image 1] It exceeded previous Las Vegas Strip spectaculars by far, including the 127-foot sign of the Sahara, from 1959, designed by YESCO. “[The Dunes sign] heralded the beginning of a new era of gaudy, gigantic, and expensive hotel marquees,”[5] noted Stamos. According to Barnard, vice-president and designer at AD-Art, the Dunes sign was the first in the “Golden Age” of signage in Las Vegas,[6] prefigured by three iconic signs of the earlier days: the Dunes Sultan, the Flamingo Champagne Tower, and the Stardust façade.

A new regime of capital, plus more complex financial structures, allowed for this new height. A company that received a business loan from the Teamster Pension Funds bought the struggling Dunes in 1956. Aided by pension funds, the Dunes would grow from 194 to 1,000 rooms, staffed by 1,800 employees, within 10 years after it opened. The new Dunes sign, in 1964, was the most visible element of this growth. It required a more complex financial structure. Since signs were getting so large and expensive, it was very common that the sign company would lease them. The $318,000 Dunes sign, as an example, was leased for 30 years from the Federal Sign Company, for $5,000 a month. With these new financial structures in place, the sky was the limit. "They said, 'I want a big phallic symbol going up in the sky as far as you can make it,'"[7] said Lee Klay, designer of the 1964 Dunes sign.

The same year, the Dunes sign was erected, saw Elvis’s *Viva Las Vegas* come out in cinemas, plus the publishing of Tom Wolfe’s seminal essay, *Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can't hear you! Too noisy) Las Vegas!!!!* And while Elvis added to the popularization of Las Vegas among the masses, Tom Wolfe popularized Las Vegas among the cultural critics. Wolfe’s initial essay shook up the cultural establishment, especially since, at that time, architectural and urban theorists thought very little of the town. Tom Wolfe theoretically “discovered” Las Vegas, delineating most of the architectural and urban theorists’ future topics of inquiry: Las Vegas as a vernacular pop city designed by the prole, and as an exciting technologically wired, but exploitative, psychedelic distortion of reality. According to British architectural theorist, Reyner

Banham, already one year after its publication, Las Vegas had become a mandatory destination for any architecture student visiting North America.[8] Banham reviewed Wolfe's book in 1967 in *Architecture Review*. He gave credit to Wolfe for having assigned Las Vegas the status of a Pop City: "Fremont Street in Las Vegas is now recognized as one of the great monuments of current pop culture, recognition largely due to Tom Wolfe's book."[9]

The new architectural avant-garde was mesmerized by the city. In the United States, Yale architecture professors Scott-Brown and Venturi took an interest in Las Vegas as well. Building on Wolf, they wrote a seminal work that catapulted Las Vegas to the forefront of the discussion of postmodernism of architecture. The book, *Learning From Las Veg*as, published in 1972, was the outcome of a 10-day research expedition for an architecture studio in 1968. The studio was based on the essay "A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas," which they had published in *Architectural Forum* in 1968. In the preface of the book they thanked the Stardust, which provided them with free accommodation, in addition to Tom Wolfe for "the particular intellectual and artistic underpinnings of this project."

Above all, what interested the theorists was the fact that Las Vegas was designed by the prole. This is what initially led Tom Wolfe to discover the city. Wolfe, with his Ph.D. from Yale, was on a journey investigating "the new culture-makers" of "popular" society, rather than the culture of the elite. His first story, on a highly unusual topic, dealt with a hot rod and custom car show that featured a kid who built a golden motorcycle, "The Golden Alligator". Published in *Esquire*, the title of the essay – "There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmmm)...." – revealed Wolfe's new writing style, which started the journalistic writing style "New Journalism". The style was commensurate with the controversial subject matter, highly unconventional in its punctuation, capitalization, and description of mundane details. Soon after the custom car shows, Wolfe made his way to the Strip.

Wolfe argued that the architecture of Las Vegas was designed by the uneducated proletariat, rather than the architectural establishment. This was precisely the reason why it was interesting and important:

> "The important thing about Las Vegas is not that the builders were gangsters but proles … Because it is prole, it gets ignored, except on the most sensational level. Yet long after Las Vegas' influence as a gambling heaven has gone, Las Vegas' forms and symbols will be influencing American life. That fantastic skyline! Las Vegas's neon sculpture, its fantastic fifteen-story-high display signs, parabolas, boomerangs, rhomboids, trapezoids, and all the rest of it, are already the staple design of the American landscape outside the oldest parts of the oldest cities. They are all over every suburb, every subdivision, every highway."[10]

Unrestrained by the constraints of education, the proletariat, or rather, the "unconscious avant-garde", would be able to create a new art vocabulary, including shapes like "Boomerang Modern, Palette Curvilinear, Flash Gordon Ming-Alert Spiral, McDonald's Hamburger Parabola, Mint Casino Elliptical, Miami Beach Kidney."[11] Therefore, Wolfe

interviewed sign designers of YESCO. When asking one of the designers how he called a particular shape of a sign Wolfe had seen on the Strip, the designer's answer, "Well, that's what we call – what we sort of call – 'free form'," exhilarated him: "Free form! Marvellous! No hung-up old art history words for these guys. America's first unconscious avant-garde! The hell with Mondrian whoever the hell he is. The hell with Moholy-Nagy, if anybody ever heard of him. Artists for the new age; sculptors for the new style …"[12]

Wolfe was particularly interested in how these designers, uninhibited by the conventions, confines and tastes of architectural education, would be able to create a whole different type of city, a "Pop" city, made out of pure signs: "In the Young Electric Sign Co. era signs have become the architecture of Las Vegas, and the most whimsical, Yale-seminar-frenzied devices of the two late geniuses of Baroque Modern, Frank Lloyd Wright and Eero Saarinen, seem rather stuffy business, like a jest at a faculty meeting, compared to it."[13] It was precisely because "the designer-sculptor geniuses of Las Vegas" were "prole", that their influence was so large. The architecture of Las Vegas was designed by, and for the people, so was the argument. This is why their style was successful and repeated throughout the entire city.

> "Men [of YESCO] like Boernge, Kermit Wayne, Ben Mitchem and Jack Larsen, formerly an artist for Walt Disney, are the designer-sculptor geniuses of Las Vegas, but their motifs have been carried faithfully throughout the town by lesser men, for gasoline stations, motels, funeral parlors, churches, public buildings, flophouses and sauna baths."

As a result, claimed Wolfe, Las Vegas was a highly unique and homogeneous city:

> "… Las Vegas is the only town in the world whose skyline is made up neither of buildings, like New York, nor trees, like Wilbraham, Massachusetts, but signs. One can look at Las Vegas from a mile away on Route 91 and see no buildings, no trees, only signs. But such signs! They tower. They revolve, they oscillate, they soar in shapes before which the existing vocabulary of art history is helpless."[14]

Wolfe even dared to compare Las Vegas to Versailles, "the only two architecturally uniform cities in Western History."[15] For Wolfe, Las Vegas embodied the new symbolic cultural high point of the people, a counter to the aristocratic class, an "American Monte Carlo" that effaces the distinction between "good" and "bad" taste

> "Las Vegas has become, just as Bugsy Siegel dreamed, the American Monte Carlo—without any of the inevitable upper-class baggage of the Riviera casinos. At Monte Carlo, there is still the plush mustiness of the nineteenth century noble lions ... There are still Wrong Forks, Deficient Accents, Poor Tailoring, Gauche Displays, Nouveau Richness, Cultural Aridity—concepts unknown in Las Vegas. For the grand debut of Monte Carlo as a resort in 1879 the architect Charles Garnier designed an opera house for the Place du Casino; and Sarah Bernhardt read a symbolic poem. For the debut of Las Vegas as a resort in 1946 Bugsy Siegel hired Abbot and Costello, and there, in a way, you have it all."[16]

In a review of Wolfe's book, Reyner Banham reflected on the possibilities of a transition in Great Britain "from a culture based on aristocratic taste to one based on free-form self-fulfillment." [17] He picked up from Wolfe that underneath the cultural transition in Las Vegas was class. The regime of capital operating the Strip had built a city that corresponded to their culture: a Pop City. "What Wolfe had discovered in Las Vegas was the 'mad money' of a relaxed proletariat conjuring up a culture and a visual style that had never been seen anywhere else in the world."[18]

Robert Venturi and Scott Brown's main thrust of their argument was similar to Wolfe's, namely that the aesthetic taste of the proletariat should be taken seriously. The "heroic" architecture of the Strip, a new neon "vernacular" designed by and for the people, was "socially less coercive and aesthetically more vital". By idealizing the naïve attempts at representation by the "people", Venturi and Scott Brown delivered a blow against the established architectural order. But it remained ambiguous if they fully embraced the phenomenon of the commercial strip, or just used it as a source of inspiration for their formal architecture. For instance, at the end of the semester, students changed the second half of the studio title "Learning from Las Vegas, or Form Analysis as Design Research" into "The Great Proletarian Cultural Locomotive",[19] perhaps revealing a simultaneous admiration and slight disdain for the architecture of the Strip. At the same time, the Strip had its suspicions of the academic outsiders. "Yale Professor Will Praise Strip for $8,925," was the announcement of a local paper on the day of the arrival of the studio, which was reprinted in the preface of the book. The paper had found out about their request for funding at the city and county hall. When a couple of days later the professors requested more funds, the newspaper announced, "Yale Professor Ups Price to Praise Strip."[20]

Learning from Las Vegas was controversial both in its claim – that the symbolic architecture of the Las Vegas Strip should be taken seriously – as well as in its method: commercial billboards, neon signs, wedding chapels, and even parking lots were meticulously mapped out. [See Image 2] The studio would study Las Vegas like architectural students would study Rome. "We believe a careful documentation and analysis of its physical form is as important to architects and urbanists today as were the studies of medieval Europe and ancient Rome and Greece to earlier generations."[21] The aim of the studio was to document the strip, and find tools for its documentation, which they claimed were still lacking and resulted in its dismissal: "… from ignorance, we define [the new type of urban form: the strip] today as urban sprawl."[22] Students mapped out everything they could find on the Strip, from commercial billboards to copies of Roman statues, from neon signs to asphalt, from autos to illumination levels, from wedding chapels to parking lots. They even attended the opening gala of the Circus Circus.

Venturi's and Scott Brown's project was to analyze the Las Vegas Strip only as a "phenomenon of architectural communication." This approach made apparent Scott Brown's architectural education under the British Independent Group, which saw the value of art in its ability to signify things, rather than in its message. Therefore, they investigated the way in which architecture and signage transmitted messages.

The typical sign on the Strip, according to Venturi, consists of two parts. The Dunes sign was such a type. The upper has the permanent "heraldry" visible from afar: 20-foot-high Dunes letters encased by an onion shape, which according to Hess, "evokes a Thousand and One Arabian Nights fantasy. But when it is read as a stylized spade, the sign reflects the roadside tradition of buildings in the shapes of the things they sell."[23] The lower part, typically a whiteboard, functioned as display of changeable "information" viewable from street level.

The fact that the Dunes sign was so incredibly large, towering above the Strip, and was separated from the building, fascinated Venturi. The signs were getting so large and elaborate that their relationship with their referent – the resort – was disrupted. Some signs rivaled the buildings that they faced. Others functioned as façade, unifying different buildings, while some buildings co-opted the aesthetic of the signs. In the case of the Dunes, the sign was so large that it rivaled the new building next to it. The sign's physical presence was also felt through its illuminative features: nearly three miles of neon tubing and 7,200 general electric lamps caused guests to complain about the glow, after which the management was forced to line all the curtains of the rooms facing the sign. The sign's gigantic two support columns, each encased in 30-ton slabs of concrete, even housed a service elevator to reach the top. "That new tower will collapse before this sign does,"[24] its builder was said to have joked. Generally, architects of the buildings next to which these giant signs would surge up were not too happy with the imposing signage. Milton Schwartz, an architect from Chicago, who designed the neighboring diamond-shaped 22-story building, the "Diamond of the Dunes", then the tallest structure in the state, with a shopping arcade and an "Alice in Wonderland" nursery, "objected to the sign's size, shape, and placement in relation to his Diamond of the Dunes."[25] The sign literally overshadowed the building he designed. [See Image 3] During the golden age of the sign, signage, rather than architecture, was more effective in setting resorts apart. Signs almost fully eclipsed their referents.

Above all, what interested Venturi, was this dissociation of the image and symbolism from the architecture. The image had become an autonomous element, applied independently from the architecture. Venturi and Scott Brown categorized buildings on the Strip into two opposing semiotic types, the "duck" and the "decorated shed". Roughly speaking, the duck was a building in which the structure was dominated by a larger symbolic form; for instance, a hot dog stand that looked like a hotdog. Modern architecture, dominated by machine and cruise-line aesthetics, was also classified as a duck. The decorated shed was a building on which ornament or information had been applied regardless of the structure underneath. The Dunes contained elements of both: its sign a symptom of a decorated shed, while the modernist tower was a typical duck. A true decorated shed was the Stardust casino in which they stayed– it was a type that they aspired to. The Stardust building was plain, shed-like, with signage applied independently from it. This is what Venturi and Scott Brown saw as a historically new organizing principle of vernacular architecture. For instance, in Baroque, Renaissance, and Gothic architecture, symbolism had been integrated into the building. By contrast, the decorated shed increasingly separated the gap between the building and the information. Mark Wigley later claimed how this "decorated gap", the gap between building and

ornamentation, would only increase, through technologies of communication and decoration, such as the poster and the video screen.[26]

A true sign war unfolded after the Dunes sign, which towered above the other signs. The second spectacular sign in 1964 was that of the Thunderbird. The "T-Bird" remodeled its façade by enveloping it with a sign, an illuminated façade, plus adding a new porte-cochere and a wedge shaped marquee topped by the bird. [See Image 4] Designed by AD-Art, the 560-foot long sign spelled THUNDERBIRD in 12-foot-high chiseled letters. It took over 70,000 light bulbs, eight miles of neon tubing, over 140,000 feet of wiring, special power lines, enough to light 300 homes, $250,000, and 10,000 man-hours to construct the sign. Unlike the Dunes, the T-Bird sign had a more symbiotic relationship with the buildings; it enveloped and unified the architecturally unrelated structures. "It created a modern, unified front out of the jumble of miscellaneous, non-related displays that preceded it, "[27] wrote Stamos.

The third sign in the golden age brought a radical departure: instead of impressing by height or length, it used its sculptural qualities to impress. In front of the first new resort of the second building boom on the Strip, the Aladdin, stood a three-dimensional revolving sign, topped by Aladdin's lamp, standing on three scrolled pylons. [See Image 5] It had decorated rows of hundreds of gold cylinders, secretly made out of beer cans. YESCO won the commission for the fifteen-story-high sign, which cost $750,000 and incorporated 40,000 light bulbs. The Aladdin, opened in 1966, was the first new resort in the second building boom on the Strip. "Breaking a nine-year lull in construction, the birth of the Aladdin signaled a new round of construction, a boom that has continued unabated to this day," wrote Stamos in a 1979 *Las Vegas Sun* article. The Aladdin was not really a new resort, but an extensive $3 million remodeling of the Tally Ho hotel, onto which, in a record time of 90 days, a new 500-seat theatre, a casino lounge, a 150-seat gourmet room, and the largest casino in the state were added. Designed by architect Martin Stern, the Aladdin was the first hotel in Nevada to use an escalator to move guests from the parking area into the casino. The Aladdin, like the Dunes, had an Arabian theme that was gaining in popularity on the Strip.

Existing resorts were forced to upgrade their signs, much to the delight of the sign companies. Ad-Art was particularly successful in winning commissions. In 1967, the company designed the 1967 Frontier sign. Rather than going after sculptural sophistication, it used height to electrify. Standing 184 feet tall, it was the largest sign at the time. An F-logo revolved above its 16-foot tall letters. [See Images 6 and 7] In 1968, Ad-Art also won the commission for the Stardust and the Flamingo sign. The Stardust sign, a cloud of blue and magenta stars, towering 188 feet above the Strip, was highly popular with the public, who constantly voted it "favorite sign spectacular" of the Strip.[28] [See Images 8 and 9] The Flamingo sign, replacing the champagne tower, was the tallest single shaft sign on the Strip, feathering out in brilliant pink, at no less than 130 feet. [See Image 10]

During the Golden Age of the Sign, some buildings, rather than competing with the signage, co-opted the aesthetic of the sign. The Landmark Hotel, the Sands expansion tower, and the Viva Hotel all shared the sculptural characteristics of their signs. These

buildings were prototypical high-rise versions of “ducks”: the towers themselves became virtual sculptures. They came after the first generation of high-rise “sheds”, which impressed simply by being higher than the surrounding low-rise resorts: the 9-story Riviera in 1955, the 14-story Sahara tower addition designed by Stern in 1959, plus the 24-story Sahara addition and 10-story Desert Inn addition in 1963. Much more innovative was the Landmark hotel, a high rise that literally resembled a sign. In 1959, Frank Caroll envisioned the Landmark as more than a simple high rise. “I, as builder, saw Las Vegas as the Promised Land, but in designing a hotel for this city, I had to have something different. I don’t like to build ‘boxes’ for hotels,” [29] he said. So his architect, Edward Hendricks, designed a saucer-like dome – with bar, restaurant, and casino – on a stem containing the rooms. [See Images 11 and 12] The design mimicked the space-age look that was popular in Los Angeles, and it was rather similar to the 1962 Seattle space needle.

The Viva Hotel, designed by Bruce Goff in 1961, proposed a triangular 22-story building that gradually tapered upwards, topped by a cap resembling a turret. [See Image 13] In the center, an open atrium lobby contained the elevators. Three ovals at the bottom of the building accommodated the casino, restaurant, and showroom. It represented another symbolic highpoint of the possibility of a popular type of architecture, which fit in seamlessly with the popular imagery of the signs. “Plumbing the depths of the national consciousness, Goff’s sublimely organic and lavishly ornamental designs belong to the same end of the spectrum of American design that includes such forbidden aesthetic fruit as Las Vegas’ gaudy populist neon architecture,”[30] writes Hess. “Its original ornament had the freshness and daring associated with the other great artists working on the Strip, the sign artists of YESCO, Ad-Art, Federal Sign, and others.”[31] Unfortunately, it lost one of the financers in a plane crash, so the project was never built. When financing was still dependent on individuals rather than corporations it was a lot less stable, but at the same time, it could allow for designs that were potentially more daring.

The 1965 Sands tower, designed by Stern, was one project that did get built. It was a 17-story cylindrical tower, defined by long elliptical shaped windows. [See Image 14] Like the Viva Hotel and the Landmark, it took the sculptural aesthetics of the signage and incorporated it into the architecture. However, the Landmark and the Sands tower would be the last towers built on the Strip with such sculptural qualities. The Strip’s dominant model for high-rises was not the incorporated symbolism of the duck, but the independently applied signage of the decorated shed, which was cheaper and easier to build.

If any building was representative of the Pop City era on the Strip, it was the Stardust. First of all, a large part of its entire façade was an elaborate sign. Secondly, it had the tallest sign on the Strip. At the same time, the building of the Stardust was as plain as possible. It was thus the perfect example of the decorated shed. Not surprisingly, this is where Venturi stayed with his students. The presence of these signs dramatically altered the experience of the Strip. Incessantly changing lighting effects went accompanied with a background orchestra of background of neon spark and electric buzz and whistle sounds.

These technological and experiential aspects of the Strip interested Reyner Banham and Archigram. It was particularly this idea of a technologically controlled environment that fascinated Banham. His review of Wolfe's book was titled as a manifesto of technology: "Towards a Million Volt Light and Sound Culture". In his own book, "The Architecture the Well-Tempered Environment", he elaborated on the technological power of the Strip. "What defines the symbolic spaces and places of Las Vegas – the superhotels of The Strip, the casino-belt of Fremont Street – is pure environmental power, manifested as coloured light … the effectiveness with which space is defined if overwhelming, the creation of virtual volumes without apparent structure is endemic, the variety and ingenuity of the lighting techniques is encyclopaedic." [32] Las Vegas, for Banham, represented "a change from forms assembled in light to light assembled in forms".[33] In a later article, he recognized how such an architecture of light was more successful than an architecture of walls: "The high and continuous façades may only be an illusion made of light, but they are more convincing than many an attempt to create the same kind of effect, the same pedestrian dominance, by means of solid and conventional architecture."[34] For Banham, Las Vegas functioned like a laboratory experiment in how far the limits of technology could be pushed. Those that were unconfined by the conventions of architectural education would better conduct such an experiment. "The point of studying Las Vegas, ultimately, would be to see as an example of how far environmental technology can be driven beyond the confines of architectural practice by designers who (for worse or better) are not inhibited by the traditions of architectonic culture, training, and taste."[35] For Banham, it was no coincidence that the Pop City was also a technologically wired city.

Similarly delighted with the technological potential of Las Vegas was the British architecture group, Archigram. Las Vegas, for Archigram, had some elements of their ideal "Instant City". [See Image 15] A never-realized project, it would move from city to city using electronic sounds, display equipment, and advertising aesthetics, with the objective of injecting local culture with a high-energy boost, transforming an ordinary place into an extraordinary one. Archigram classified Las Vegas a *Pop Cité trouvé*[36], specifically because of its use of "electrics-as-place". Their only objection was that the electric spectacle lacked interactivity:

> "Las Vegas suggests that a really powerful environment can be created simply by passing an electric current – in daytime the hardware is nothing. Lights combined with cinema projection can make the whole place a city where there is no city. It is suggested that the visitor himself could play with large areas of this lighting so that he makes it happen rather than gawk at it."[37]

Archigram's faintly critical side note highlights the lack of critical position on behalf of the architectural theorists. More after its glorification, they were never really interested in the exploitative effects of this commercial high-tech landscape. Venturi and his colleagues had no interests in the darker side of the city. "Las Vegas' values are not questioned here. The morality of commercial advertising, gambling interests, and the competitive instinct is not at issue,"[38] they wrote in the introduction. For instance, on casinos interiors, which they interpreted as the new architecture of "monumentality", they wrote: "The combination of darkness and enclosure of the gambling room and its

subspaces makes for privacy, protection, concentration, and control."[39] The closest they came to being critical was when they noted the following: "Perhaps we should admit that our cathedrals are the chapels without the nave and that, apart from theaters and ball parks, the occasional communal space that is big is a space for crowds of anonymous individuals without explicit connection with each other. The big, low mazes of the dark restaurant with alcoves combine being together and yet separate as does the Las Vegas casino."[40]

Wolfe was more concerned with the exploitative side of this technologically wired city, specifically by (wrongfully) reminding the reader that Las Vegas is the vision of Mafiosi Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel. He starts his story with the depiction of a gambler called Raymond, who, in a state of "toxic schizophrenia", keeps mumbling, "Hernia Hernia Hernia Hernia." Raymond, "a good example of the marvelous impact Las Vegas has on the senses",[41] was "beginning to isolate the components of Las Vegas' unique bombardment of the senses."[42] Wolfe considered Raymond a typical victim of the postmodern barrage of the senses, a result of the exploitative use of technology, such as Muzak. "Muzak pervades Las Vegas from the time you walk into the airport upon landing to the last time you leave the casinos. It is piped out to the swimming pool. It is in the drugstores. It is as if there were a communal fear that someone, somewhere in Las Vegas, was going to be left with a totally vacant minute on his hands,"[43] he wrote. Already in 1952, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* noted that Las Vegas had the highest per capita sound installations, air travel, and neon.[44] Huge flows of capital had transformed the uninhabitable landscape into a technologically-advanced wired environment, causing Wolfe to observe that Las Vegas "has succeeded in wiring an entire city with this electronic stimulation, day and night, out in the middle of the desert."[45] Even though some of these stimuli were more low-tech, such as the humming of the croupiers and "a stimulus that is both visual and sexual – the Las Vegas buttocks décolletage," in the juxtaposition of these stimuli "the casualties start piling up." Wolfe visited the psychiatric ward of the County Hospital, where these victims ended up – among them, poor Raymond.

3.1.2 Theme Totality

Just as significant as the erection of the Dunes sign, yet much less known, was its neighboring seafood restaurant, a saucer-shaped "Dome of the Sea", as part of the 1964 Dunes expansion. It represented the second major characteristic of the Pop era on the Strip: highly thematic architecture. More than the expressive modernist outside, it was the extremely themed interior that was significant. Schwartz collaborated with Sean Kenney, a set designer, who had worked with Frank Lloyd Wright, on the design. The restaurant was designed to actually transport people to a different place: to the bottom of the ocean. "It was a circular building, and it looked like it came from outer space … It just felt like it fit in the desert to me. It had structural elements that support domes and stainless steel rods that were two inches thick holding the dome from these structural elements that fell into a pool of water, a reflecting pool, with fountains that bubbled up underneath it,"[46] said Schwartz. On the inside of the dome, images of underwater scenes, such as fish and seaweed, were projected on the walls: "We actually made people seasick with some of the underwater scenes!"[47] Schwartz commented. He chose a five-foot-six blonde woman,

who would play a golden harp, “and I placed her in a seashell in the center of the restaurant that rolled around on a figure eight track in the water.”[48] [See Image 16] Although from the outside, it was built in a modernist style, in its effort to transport people to a different place, the restaurant fit in the tradition of the theme park that was initiated by the Frontier Village.

This strategy found its culmination in the two resorts designed by Jay Sarno. He incorporated imagery from the popular culture, not just in the signage, but also into all aspects of the resort. From the landscaping to the interior, from worker outfits to services, all had to fit in the grand scheme of the theme. Backed by loans from the Teamsters Central States Pension Fund, Sarno was able to realize two of his grandiose visions: Caesars Palace and Circus Circus. These completely-themed pleasure palaces preceded the resorts that would define the third building boom of the Strip during the 1990s.

Jay Sarno’s personal connection with the Teamster boss Jimmy Hoffa enabled him to build his bizarre visions on the Strip. With his first Teamster loan, he built the Atlanta Cabana Hotel. Jo Harris, one of the designers who would continue to work with Sarno, filled it with statues, fountains, and mirrors. More Cabanas were developed, including one in Palo Alto, California, which set the precedent for a Las Vegas project; it had a long driveway lined with fountains and statues. Sarno was an avid gambler, and he wanted to build a resort on the Strip. He was the first to take advantage of Teamster Pension Funds to finance a new resort on the Strip. Between 1965 and 1972, the project received a total of $20.4 million in Teamster loans, the largest amount of capital the fund would give out to a single development. The property, completed in 1966, cost $19 million, which Sarno inflated to $25 million for publicity purposes. With 680 rooms and more than 25,000 square feet of convention space, the resort was simultaneously the most expensive and over-the-top that the Strip had seen. In addition, it was the first completely new resort on the Strip after a nine-year break.

Sarno considered the already existing Strip resorts mediocre, so he had something more grandiose in mind. First of all, Sarno aspired to something different from the prevailing western, Caribbean, African, and Arabian styles. He introduced a more exotic theme, one that was from a different time as well as place – a classical theme. “I felt it was time to do something not too western, but more refined. A Roman-Greco motif was something new,”[49] said Sarno. Thus, the project of Caesars Palace was born. “Caesars Palace introduces a new architectural motif – the Classic – to the glittering edifices of the Strip,”[50] proclaimed the advertising. It was “conceived as a taste of Royal Roman Splendor,” themed according to the mood of the “Golden Age of Rome”. However, the desire for spectacle superseded the authentic depiction of the Roman theme. “Complete authenticity we don’t have … My approach is to guess what the public will like,”[51] admitted Sarno. Only those aspects were picked from history that conformed to the popular imagination. “As you will shortly see, I, CAESAR, have drawn on only the most enchanting and the best parts of historical fact, romantic legend and the myths of the gods to create my Palace of Pleasure,” [52] stated the Caesars Palace advertising. Moreover, these “finest facets of Ancient Rome”, were “updated by the skills of the present”.[53]

Secondly, Sarno thought the themes on the Strip were only skin deep. He thought the resorts on the Strip expressed their themes only superficially; instead, he would pioneer

the total theme on the Strip. Everything from detail to layout was designed with the theme in mind. “Everything in the complex, from its 14-story main section to the lavish landscaping, is Roman-Grecian in mood and inspiration,” [54]stated the advertising. The theme was to encompass all aspects of the customer experience. [See Image 17]

The theme extended all the way from the sidewalk to the entrance of the casino. On the Strip, a Roman sign conveyed the theme to pedestrians and automobilists. It consisted of a pediment with four Ionic columns holding an architrave and cornice. [See Image 18] Built by Ad-Art, it was designed by YESCO. When the designers presented their idea for the sign to Sarno, they placed scaled Roman figures on the bottom of the model for presentation purposes only. Sarno liked the sign as well as the figures, so the sign was built with fiberglass Roman centurions and maidens on the base. The figures provided a “picture gallery” for tourist snapshots. As more tourists made their way to the Strip, it became an increasingly dense with pedestrians. The sign now offered an attraction to them, rather than just catering to vehicular traffic. In addition, unlike the typical resort on the Strip that was fronted by parking lots, Sarno added a monumental symmetrical entrance. [See Images 19 and 20] However, the entrance had a motif borrowed from Baroque Rome, rather than classical Rome; only the more dramatic architectural and urban motifs from Roman history were to be recycled in the resort, despite the anachronism. The main building, set back 135 feet from the Strip, was connected to the sidewalk and the highway by a front drive lined with cypresses, statues, and fountains. Although Caesars built on the fountain tradition, started by Desert Inn in 1950, the recessed entrance was a huge surprise to Las Vegans. “He got arguments from everyone in town: It was too far back from the street. He’d go broke before you knew it. It was too far out on the Strip. You can’t dress cocktail waitresses like that,”[55] remembered Sarno’s wife Joyce. Yet behind the innovation of the pompous entrance lurked the old low-rise resort typology. Caesars Palace, on the West side of the tower, still had traditional low-rise wings around the pool, typical of a roadside motel. [See Image 21] Moreover, any future additions to the resort would simply be added to the resort in hodge-podge fashion, like all resorts did at the time.

Fountains, cypresses, statues, and lavish furnishings throughout the resort added to the classical experience. Eighteen huge fountains stood in the center and to the sides of the drive, reportedly the largest private fountains in the United States, too high even for daredevil motorcyclist Evel Knievel, who failed to jump them. [See Image 22] Cypresses, many of which were dying in the desert, stood along the drive. But, noted a reporter of the *Los Angeles Times*, Sarno “was not going to be thwarted by a couple of dozen recalcitrant trees, ‘I don’t worry, as they die off, I’ll just keep on replacing them. People say to me, ‘So why not have palm trees?’ But I say that palms just don’t have the *character* we want here’.”[56] Famous classical sculptures, such as the “Rape of the Sabines”, were reproduced and rescaled so they would each be a similar height. Along with tons of marble and stone used in the resort, the statuary was imported from Italy. “The statuary that I used at Caesars was cut from the finest, purest, grade A Carrera marble from Florence. You know, with one statue, the ‘Rape of the Sabines,’ I had to argue like hell to get the sculptor to ship it to America. He feared that it would be damaged in transit,” said Sarno.[57] The sculpture, perhaps symbolically aligned with Sarno’s vision of conquest and sexuality, stood at the entrance. A total of $150,000 worth

of statuary imported from Florence was depicted in a catalogue, which explained the statues' history in museum-like fashion. Caesars Palace used the replicas to elevate its own cultural sophistication. [See Image 23] As much as possible, the theme was continued inside the resort. The 800-seat Circus Maximus theatre had blue walls to create a more "authentic" evening mood. [See Image 24] The resort breathed luxury; the lobby was decorated with gold leafing and Brazilian rosewood, while the casino was surrounded by marble columns and featured the world's largest crystal chandelier. Many suites were duplex, with spiral staircases, and had grand pianos.

Sarno's resort was a perfect representation of a building designed by the prole, as described by Wolfe and Venturi. Although Sarno did not have an architectural education, he was very much involved with the design, and carried the theme through the entire resort. "My approach is to guess what the public will like," he said during the opening of his first resort, Caesars Palace. "It must be exciting and must give full pleasure. I'm not an architect or interior designer. I worked with pencil in hand and the help of the staff."[58] Therefore, Caesars Palace reflected the personality of its founder. It was no coincidence that the round man depicted on the logo of the resort, lying on a couch in a toga, about to be fed a bunch of grapes by a beautiful girl, bore a close resemblance to Sarno. [See Image 25] Sarno prided himself in being a non-typical designer, a quarterback of the design team that included Miami architect Melvin Grossman and Jo Harris. "In your opinion, do I look like any designer you ever met?" he asked a *Los Angeles Times* reporter. "So I don't look like a designer, but see that block outside there through the window … That's the Sarno Block, I've had it patented and anybody wants to use it, they have to come to me! See this office? It's elliptical. An ellipse, in my opinion, is the friendliest shape. The new convention hall we're building will be my version of a Roman circus – elliptical." Sarno had a particular affinity for oval and elliptical shapes. "Over the years that I have been creating hotels, I've discovered that the oval is a magic shape … this is conducive to relaxation," said Sarno. "If you examine Caesar's casino, you will find that it is oval shaped. I even incorporated the oval design into the dice tables, which affects the dice angle geometry. Because the casino is shaped in an oval, people tend to relax and play longer. And the casino's intimate feeling is no accident either; it is an optical illusion created by the twenty false columns encircling it."[59] Compared to other casino floors, the dome of Caesars palace and even the main, 14-story tower were crescent-shaped, another function of the oval, according to Sarno. [See Image 26]

Sarno's eccentricity and obsession with the Roman theme went beyond the architecture of the casino. Bacchanal restaurant, for instance, had a "grape treatment" for guests. Waitresses –called "goddesses" – would introduce themselves to guests saying, "I am your slave," and responded to orders: "Yes, master."[See Image 27] A line of goddesses even stood at the airport for arriving guests. [See Image 28] Sarno pushed the theme to the extreme, according to a publicity brochure for the Bacchanal restaurant: "And it so happened that Sarno, intrigued by the decadence of ancient Roman emperors, decided to add a little excitement to the restaurant's central pool. He filled the pool with piranha, and, emulating some historic account of ancient bacchanalia, he intended to sacrifice a baby pig nightly – to pick up the pace after the entrée service." Luckily for the baby pigs, the health department intervened.

The theme was meant to arouse customers with a particular mindset. Of course, the classical scenery contributed to removing guests as far from their everyday reality as possible, making them more likely to gamble. But at the same time, Caesars Palace was selling a personalized luxury experience. “Everybody is a Caesar,” Sarno used to say, meaning that everyone could be like a king for just one day at Caesars Palace. “As you move through the wonders of Caesars Palace, let each moment remind you that here and now is the time for your personal glory and delight,”[60] stated the advertising. This philosophy was even reflected in the name of the resort, Caesars Palace, which deliberately lacked an apostrophe. "We didn't want to have an apostrophe before the 'S' which would be singular possessive as if one Caesar owned this particular palace. We didn't want to have an apostrophe after the 'S' which would be plural possessive as if more than one Caesar owned the palace. Without the apostrophe, it's the plural of a large group - meaning the whole world - because we want everyone in the world to know they can come here and enjoy a palace that would be enjoyed by the Caesars,"[61] said Sarno. As Caesars Palace allowed anyone to be a king for a day, Caesars perfected the democratization of luxury,[62] or rather, the commodification of status, through an eclectic mix of marble columns, classical statues, grape treatments, and grand pianos.

However, Sarno realized that this luxurious approach might alienate some customers, especially on the lower end of the tourist market. So his second new property on the Strip was meant to attract the other end of tourist market. Sarno wanted “to attract the mass, not the class. We’d rather have 1,000 $10 players than one $10,000 player,”[63] he said. Importantly, Sarno described the new venture as “a project that’s suitable for the entire family,”[64] and “Las Vegas’ only family casino,” conveniently forgetting the Hacienda. The project opened as a casino without a hotel in 1968, and did not open the first 400 rooms until 1972, since Sarno was unable to get additional financing. Because corporate gaming was not yet in place, loans were the only sources of income, and they were hard to get. The limitations of the Teamsters Central States Pension Fund were apparent.

Because he introduced a new theme that appealed to a different class, Sarno prevented the symbolic devaluation of his first resort. The new project, Circus Circus, was as elaborately themed as Caesars Palace, but took the theme of the circus rather than the classics. Initially, Sarno wanted to build it next to Caesars, so it would have been called the Roman Circus, blending with the theme next door. But when he found another site, “I decided to scrap the plans for a Roman circus, and build a circus like we’re all familiar with: a *circus* circus.”[65] The new theme circumvented the potential dilution of the classical theme of Caesars Palace. Another reason for this particular theme was Sarno’s frustration with expensive entertainers. Circus acts would be a lot cheaper to fund. *The Los Angeles Times* noted that Circus Circus was “equally innovative and perfectly contrary. It was conceived not out of desire for architectural exotica but out of spite. Frustrated with pricey and temperamental entertainers, Sarno thought cheaper circus acts would help him cut costs and attract the masses.”

Circus Circus represented the perfect “duck”; the symbolism of the circus was expressed dramatically on the inside of the building as well as the outside. Sarno called Circus Circus “a true hybrid structure.” The architectural program of a casino was situated in a permanently based circus show. The building was a 90-foot-high, plexi-glass, tent-shaped

big top, painted electric pink and white. It was thus a duck: architects Rissman and Rissman had applied symbolism to the structure as a whole. Rissman later quipped on his architecture in a 1983 interview with the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, which revealed the similar organizing principle between his circus tent and modernist architecture. “To Rissman, the structures are examples of the classic design philosophy form follows function. In this case the function is to attract and entertain.”[66]

In front of the building, a 306-foot-long fountain area – even bigger than Caesars – featured color-changing fountains. [See Image 29] Sarno planned to catapult two human projectiles across the fountain, who would cross in mid-air. In front of the resort on the Strip stood a sign designed by YESCO that doubled as a carousel. [See Image 30] In addition, twelve heroic-sized statues designed by sculptor-painter-circus artiste the “great Montyne”, including an acrobat and a gorilla, stood in front of the new hotel.

Once inside the building, the mad juxtaposition of the midway and the gambling area became fully apparent. “The customer will be confronted with jugglers, fortune tellers, trapeze, and highwire acts operating right over the gambling area,” wrote the *Las Vegas Review-Journal.*[67] The craps and roulette tables, as well as the 680 slot machines, were surrounded by circus acts. [See Images 31 and 32] Sarno himself described the experience:

> “As you go from the second floor to the first floor in this particular establishment, you can use a slide, a fireman’s pole or a ramp surrounding a stage with all kinds of entertainment, trampoline, unicyclists, more jugglers, a weight guesser, a fellow spinning dishes and catching them before they fall. Then all of a sudden here comes a Highland Marching Band. There’s a girl selling balloons, over there is a very provocatively-dressed shoe-shine girl, here’s a fellow leading two little pink elephants, you can ride them or pet them. You can play a slot machine with our Money Monkey, who jumps for joy if you win or holds his head in sorrow if you lose. There’s another monkey who runs a store. If you want something, give him the money and he’ll bring you the product.”[68]

In addition to the games, the midway featured a baseball toss game that made a girl fall out of bed as the target were hit, as well as "the world's best pickup joint", which had numbered tables with phones that could be used to call people at other tables.[69] Some of the most notable acts included an acrobat capable of doing the world’s only triple-and-one-half somersault on a flying trapeze, along with an acrobat that dove 60 feet into a wet sponge, and an elephant operating a slot machine. [See Images 33 and 34] All of this circus drama unfolded in a tent with a low ceiling that was painted black on the inside and had many mirrors, so as to give a constant nightly impression, as well as to focus attention on the people and the gambling. It was this dark side of the circus and the absolutist totality of the single theme that had frightened Hunter S. Thompson. “The *Circus-Circus* is what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the *Nazis* had won the war. This is the Sixth Reich," he wrote in “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,” a famous essay that appeared in *Rolling Stone Magazine* in 1971.

The surreal juxtaposition of gambling and the circus was not conducive to business, however. “We have been careful to train our gaming dealers (on the ground level) to keep

from looking up at the circus and carnival entertainment, for obvious reasons,"[70] said Sarno. The customers, on the other hand, without such training, were easily distracted from the games, a gaming consultant explained: "The only problem with Jay's vision was that having all of this activity, taking over -- taking place over the head of the gamblers, was not conducive to gambling, so we'd have a crap game going and all of a sudden Norbo the Ape Man would come down a rope with the trainer chasing him, shooting caps off and so on and of course the crap shooters are looking at this like what the hell's going on. We had another idiot -- we had a hole in the pit and he would dive from the top rigging into this pit on the casino floor."[71] Sarno, dressed up as a ringmaster, added to the circus atmosphere of confusion by jumping in front of a group of gamblers asking them trivia questions. Circus Circus was a difficult place for serious gamblers. [See Image 35] Moreover, the entrée charge at the door proved unsuccessful. In 1974, Sarno turned over the property to Bennett and Pennington. The first thing that they did was to eliminate the admission fee. They also placed a roof over the casino, in order to separate the casino from the circus acts. In this slightly toned-down version, it became a financially successful property. In the organization of the casino complex, Sarno had taken the theme – previously a mere marketing gimmick to decorate the gambling – too far.

Circus Circus would be Sarno's final masterpiece on the Strip. Although he planned to build the 6,000-room Grandissimo, he could not get the financing. Finally, he died close to a gambler's death – like two of his brothers, who died at the craps tables – when he dropped dead in a suite in his Caesars Palace. However, the idea of the total theme would continue to live on in the Strip. "Caesars Palace is totally Roman. Circus Circus is totally circus. These other places built since then are mishmashes. He was the first on to appreciate the total concept, right down to the matchbooks. Everything was thematic, and we had a lot of help from the Disney people on Circus Circus,"[72] said Don Williams, former Las Vegas publicist and assistant to Jay Sarno.

Sarno's bizarre visions, thanks to the large amounts of pension funds that financed them, turned casinos into architectural attractions in their own right. Although theming already existed on the Strip, it was leveled off after the Last Frontier. Sarno brought theming back with a vengeance; it was a lesson that Strip operators would not forget. Sarno's visions would influence the ultra-themed casino resorts during the third boom on the Strip in the 1990s.

With the opening of Circus Circus, the pop era had reached its pinnacle. The inauguration of Circus Circus even coincided with the visit of Venturi's studio; the entire studio attended the gala opening. However, already before *Learning from Las Vegas* was published, the Strip was headed in a different direction. Teamster money was drying up; a new regime of capital would enter the Strip and overthrow the Pop City paradigm in exchange for new aesthetics. Just in time, right before its demise, Pop City theorists captured the high point of the sign and themed environments. Their work now provides a snapshot in time. They celebrated the enigmatic pop era, a long-gone historical period in the ever-evolving Strip. As the process of corporatization unfolded, the Strip adopted a more conservative modernist style. In a great irony, as Las Vegas was heralded as the revolutionary postmodern city, modernism on the Strip was in retreat. Moreover, after Circus Circus, the duck - not the celebrated decorated shed – prevailed on the Strip.

Especially in the 1990s, an entire generation of decorated sheds was gradually imploded in exchange for ducks. Because unlike the decorated shed, whose symbolism can be removed and changed relatively easily, for a duck to shed its theme, or for a decorated shed to morph into a duck, there is only one way: an implosion. The Strip had no interest in the architects' theoretical preferences; instead, it blew them up.

However, the Pop City theorists had a big impact on the discourse on postmodern architecture. The architecture of the Las Vegas Strip was not only seen as the iconoclast that would bring down modernism; Las Vegas would become the quintessential city of postmodern forms. In 1968, Wolf used Las Vegas, the ultimate electrographic Pop City, as a challenge to the then still dominant yet slowly eroding modernist paradigm. "The hell with the Bauhas, Mies, Corbu and Billy Apple!" he wrote in the essay "Electrographic Architecture" in *New York Magazine*, which would reappear the following year in *Architectural Design*. "Many of the spires and luminous objects, shooting up or floating in the atmosphere, have no function whatsoever other than display … They are there for visual excitement. Functionalism – the hell with it!"[73] Wolfe had heralded the end of functionalist modernism four years before the implosion of modernist housing complex Pruitt Igoe, a moment that Charles Jencks had identified as the end of the modernist paradigm.

But even more influential then Wolfe in the formation of postmodernism in architecture was *Learning from Las Vegas*. The book – published in a spectacular first edition that had a gold-stamped title and a glassine wrap, printed in black and red, until it, more appropriately, was turned into a paperback – became an incredible success, thrusting Venturi, who was then little-known, into the forefront of architectural theory. In its rejection of modern architecture with its hypocritical disdain for the popular and symbolic, and its lack of historical consciousness and appreciation of contemporary vernacular architecture, it heavily influenced the post-modern movement in architecture. Postmodern architects happily learned from the pastiche architecture of Las Vegas resorts in their lavish quotations from the past and other places. In all books on post-modern architecture, such as *The Language of Postmodern Architecture, Learning from Las Vegas* took an important role. Finally, the book was instrumental in the formation of the discipline of architectural semiotics.

The most venomous critique on the postmodern architectural discourse, stemming from Las Vegas, was from Fredric Jameson. Jameson notices a big difference between postmodernism as "(optional) style among many others", and one that conceives it as "a cultural logic of capitalism".[74] According to Jameson, *Learning from Las Vegas* was "aesthetic populism" that effaced the "(essentially high modernist) frontier between high culture and so called mass or commercial culture."[75] As such, Venturi's work, in its appreciation of commercial architecture, was complicit in the social reproduction of late capitalism. Late capitalism, he claimed, had further colonized the cultural sphere to accelerate turnover, and Venturi's discourse was one of the effects. This, he claimed, was no surprise; of all the arts, architecture lies closest to economics. In a way, *Learning from Las Vegas* released architecture from the "fixity" of modernism, even though Venturi would resent the later transformations of the Strip. It was a populist justification to accelerate the turnover of architectural commodities: the Strip was seen as an architecture

by and for “the people”. Foster later critiqued Venturi’s work on similar grounds, namely that it was a form of populism in which he had conflated the commercial with the civic and trademarks with public symbols. [76]

Moreover, Jameson critiqued Venturi for simply replicating old modernist solutions. After all, Venturi had used the architecture of the Las Vegas Strip as inspiration of his own, elitist architecture. The difference lied in his source of inspiration, which instead of modernist utopianism, was based on commercialism. “They no longer attempt, as did the masterworks and monuments of high modernism, to insert a different, a distinct, an elevated, a new Utopian language into the tawdry and commercial sign system of the surrounding city, but rather they seek to speak that very language, using its lexicon and syntax as that has been emblematically ‘learned from Las Vegas’.” For Jameson, Venturi’s work was fundamentally modernist. However, the fact that the so-called postmodern writers did not understand this complexity, made them postmodern, according to Jameson.

The contradiction is that the very difference between high and low culture Venturi effaced by studying the commercial architecture of the Strip, he required in order to justify his engagement in the realms of art and aesthetics. Just like Pop artists used popular culture for their formal art, so was the “ugly and ordinary” architecture of Strip an inspiration for Venturi’s formal architecture. This distance also explained why Venturi had no impact on the actual architecture direction of the Strip. Venturi’s tool of “irony”, which became so important in postmodern architecture, was a problem.[77] The tool of irony allowed the cultural elite to quote from the commercial vernacular, while at the same time being distanced from it. Since irony separated Venturi from the very same system that he was observing, it limited his influence. Being outside the system, unlike the “designer sculptor geniuses” of YESCO, he was unable to change things; Venturi had thus no impact on the urban history of the Strip whatsoever.

3.2 Corporate Modern

The second phase of the second building boom on the Strip is best described as Corporate Modern. The Corporate Modern Era had two visible characteristics on the Strip: the megaresort typology and international modernist aesthetics. As corporate money replaced Mafia and Teamster financing, a different aesthetic was adopted. In a time when gambling still carried some stigma, corporations had no intention to innovate. Rather, they chose a more conservative aesthetic that was common in corporate America: corporate modernism. Hotel towers on the Strip looked little different from hotels or corporate office buildings elsewhere in the world, while eccentricities of existing resorts were gradually ironed out in boardrooms. At the same time, the unprecedented amounts of corporate capital changed the typology of the resort. It caused the advent of the megaresort, in which neon signage deferred to giant corporate towers: the mass of the building was considered sufficient to grab attention. Even though the towers could have had more sculptural qualities, corporations desired a relatively austere aesthetic. However, corporate modern does not equal International Modernism. Although these buildings had high modernist shells, their inside is better categorized as postmodern in

their experience; it was the old adage of the Strip: International Modernism was taken as another theme.

Underneath this stylistic shift from pop to modern lay an economic crisis. Nevada knew its Mafia era would come to an end, but without a new regime of capital in place, it only superficially attempted to get rid of organized crime. Fearing federal interference with its lucrative gaming revenues, Nevada attempted to clean up its Mafia image. In the 1960s, it established the "Black Book" (originally known as the "List of Excluded Persons") in order to bar criminal individuals. It was mainly a public relations move on behalf of the state. Only criminals that fit the "Italian" Mafia caricature, not criminals that established themselves as legitimate, were not put on the list. Farell and Case claimed that: "The images of disreputability are drawn largely from those that are publicly accepted and promulgated by the media."[78] Meanwhile, most venues were still Mafia operated: the Dunes, the Stardust, the Riviera, the Flamingo, the Tropicana, the Sands, and Caesars Palace were known to skim profits and avoid taxes. However, with the federal government stepping up the battle against organized crime, resources on the Strip were drying up. When federal efforts eliminated the Mafia influence on the Teamsters, the Strip could no longer rely on Teamsters Pension funds. During the 1960s, the United States' Department of Justice tried to convict Hoffa on multiple occasions. He was finally imprisoned in 1967. Even though he was released four years later, he was not allowed to seize back control of the Union. Hoffa disappeared in 1975 under mysterious circumstances; his body never to be found. In 1977, allegations of control by organized crime forced the Teamsters to cede control of the Central States Pension funds, including its ability to give loans to outside regulators. The Teamster era of financing had officially come to an end.

Just when the Teamster phase of financing was coming to an end, corporate money found its way to the Strip. The two steps that were instrumental in moving from a Mafia phase of financing to a corporate one was the arrival of Howard Hughes and the Nevada Corporate Gaming act, which allowed publicly traded companies to own casinos. As a result, unprecedented amounts of corporate capital would come to the Strip. Only after this had occurred was the Strip able to eliminate its Mafia roots.

Corporate capital introduced the megaresort as the new paradigmatic typology on the Strip. As land along the Strip was getting more expensive, and was furthermore becoming less available, since most of the Strip had already been suburbanized, the sprawling bungalow style that characterized resorts of the previous building boom was no longer appropriate. The low-rise bungalow resort typology had become obsolete. At the same time, there was more demand for hotel rooms. Especially after the new convention center had been built, Las Vegas became a prominent convention destination. As a result, a more dense and compact footprint made sense. Stern integrated all the facilities of the resort in a single mega-structure. Of course, the megaresorts were a lot more expensive to build. But with corporate financing in place, unprecedented amounts of capital could flow into the Strip. The initial two megaresorts, however, did not give back much to the Strip. They were even more self-contained than the earlier resorts, and they were less responsive to context with the potential to be plopped down on any site,

whether along a highway or by the sea. Although their image suggested urbanity, they were still suburban by nature.

The shift in architectural style is best explained by looking at the way in which the decision-making process, as well as the international reach, differed between the two capital regimes. Before the 1968 corporate gaming law, only individuals were allowed to obtain licenses. Individual owners could hire architects and make design decisions on whim. It was a lot more difficult for a corporation to be idiosyncratic. The corporate "design by committee" quickly ironed out the eccentricities of the early resorts. "Corporate thinking built the tower that put Bugsy Siegel's pool, the pinnacle of his vision of leisure, in the shade all day long,"[79] noted Rothman. Focused on quarterly earnings reports and the bottom line, corporations initially had no intent towards architectural innovation. They preferred to have an aesthetically safe style, for relatively little money, in an industry that was slowly gaining respect on Wall Street.

In addition, as corporations entered Las Vegas, a normalization process started on the Strip. Since most corporations involved with the Las Vegas Strip owned hotels across the United States, corporate decision-making narrowed the difference in architectural styles between their Las Vegas hotels and those in other cities. The corporations' disembodiment from the Las Vegas Strip, being controlled from distant offices in New York and Los Angeles, further added to the trend. Like corporations across America and the world, in the three decades after WWII, they liked to borrow from the International Modernist style, because its universalizing tendency aligned with corporate interests of nationally and internationally known brands. As the Strip's architecture normalized, it was no longer a topic of interest to architectural and urban theorists. Cultural critics, on the other hand, were interested by the landscape of corporate logos that were forming on the Strip. They theorized this new phase of the Strip as a "hyperreality".

3.2.1 The Mass of Megaresorts

Two figures, Hughes and Kerkorian, both multi millionaires that started their career in aviation, played a crucial role in the corporatization of the Strip. Hughes cleaned up the image of Las Vegas in the eyes of Wall Street; Kerkorian built the new megaresorts, the future type of resorts. Hughes attempted to normalize the eccentricities of the existing resorts of the pop era; Kerkorian set the new corporate modern paradigm. Even though the megaresorts took an international modernist style, International Modernism was just taken as a theme. What was really different was that the mass of the corporate megaresort superseded the architecture of lightness of the pop era.

Although the reclusive millionaire Howard Hughes hadn't built any new resorts, he lent his respectability to the Strip. The presence of Hughes on the Strip symbolically paved the way for corporations to enter the gaming industry. "He cleaned up the image of Las Vegas," said Hughes' right-hand man, Robert Mahue, who functioned as Hughes' alter ego during his reclusive years. "I have had the heads of large corporate entities tell me they would never have thought of coming here before Hughes came."[80]Even the *Wall Street Journal* had a name for the impact that Hughes had on renewing the new attention of corporate investors in buying casinos: the "Hughes effect".

Howard Hughes was close to being a national hero. He was an accomplished film director, aviator, and industrialist, and he was one of the most affluent individuals in the world. At the same time, he was diagnosed with a mental health disorder: Hughes suffered particularly from obsessive-compulsive disorder. However, since he was also the United States Air Force main contractor, his mental health conditions were kept under the radar. Hughes had been a regular visitor to Las Vegas during the 1950s and 1960s. Towards the end of his life, when he was getting more reclusive, he decided to move to Las Vegas. "I'm sick and tired of being a small fish in the big pond of Southern California," Hughes complained. "I'll be a big fish in a small pond. I want people to pay attention when I talk."[81]

A peculiar anecdote ignited his involvement on the Strip. The ascetic Hughes arrived on the Strip on the night of Thanksgiving in 1966. He rented the entire top penthouse floor of the Desert Inn to himself and his staff. After weeks, casino management requested that Hughes leave, since the casino was not making money on the recluse. With the holidays coming up, they wanted to have the penthouse rooms available for high rollers. Instead of moving out, Hughes decided to put in a bid for the entire resort. He bought the casino for $13.25 million. Once he found out that the $546 million sale of his interests in Trans World Airlines would be taxed less if invested in casinos, he initiated a buying spree. "How many more of these toys are available?" he asked Mahue. "Let's buy 'em all."[82] Within months, he would buy the Sands for $23 million, the Castaways for $3.3 million, and the Frontier for $23 million. The Mafia, growing tired of the constant federal surveillance, happily sold their properties to Hughes. The Silver Slipper and Stardust were next on Hughes' list.

Hughes' buying spree was pathological. Legend has it that Hughes bought the Silver Slipper because its sign – a giant rotating silver slipper – irritated him. Apparently, after each rotation, the nose of the slipper pointed to his room in the Desert Inn. Hughes thought the slipper contained a camera spying on him. After failed attempts at having the sign switched off, he bought the casino for $5.4 million, removed the rotating mechanism, and filled the slipper with concrete. [See Image 36] At the same time, Hughes kept buying other properties, terrified as he was of the "excessive competition, or the threat of excessive competition, or competition of a type I consider harmful."[83] For Hughes, the only way out of this threat was to buy out the competition: "It would only take the acquisition of a very few additional casinos plus the elimination of these casinos from the competitive group – in other words, just a small tipping of the scales – a small addition to one side of the scale and a small elimination from the weights resting on the competitive side – just a small change in the balance and I would be satisfied."[84] Every time large amounts of capital entered the Strip, monopolistic situations followed. In order to get a competitive advantage, Hughes consolidated the industry. He became the largest casino operator in the state in 1968, accumulating one-third of the revenue generated on the Strip. In addition, he bought most of the vacant land along the Las Vegas Strip. This prevented the construction of new projects by others, since land not controlled by Hughes was at a premium. Hughes further diversified his portfolio by buying North Las Vegas Air Terminal, the old McCarran airport, as well as a television station so that he could watch western and war movies at night. "Welcome to Las Vegas, Howard Hughes' Monopoly set," said Johnny Carson to greet his audience.

Hughes' larger mission was to make the Strip more respectable. "I want to acquire even more hotels and … make Las Vegas as trustworthy and respectable as the New York Stock Exchange – so that Nevada gambling will have the kind of reputation that Lloyds of London has, so that Nevada on a note will be like Sterling on silver,"[85] he wrote to Mahue. But Hughes' vision of what was respectable was tied to class and image. Hughes wanted to make the Strip more luxurious and glamorous, in the tradition of the Flamingo and the Tropicana.

> "I like to think of Las Vegas in terms of a well-dressed man in a dinner jacket, and a furred female getting out of an expensive car … I think that is what the public expects here -- to rub shoulders with V.I.P.'s and Stars, etc. - possibly dressed in sports clothes, but if so, at least in good sports clothes. I don't think we should permit this place to degrade into a freak or amusement park category, like Coney Island."[86]

It was the middle-class side of Las Vegas that bothered Hughes. The property that Hughes loathed most was Circus Circus.

> "The aspect of the Circus that has me disturbed is the popcorn, peanuts, and kids side of it . . . And also the Carnival Freaks and Animal side of it. In other words the poor dirty, shoddy side of Circus life. The dirt floor, sawdust and elephants. The part of a circus that is associated with the poor boys in town, the hobo clowns, and, I repeat, the animals. The part of the circus that is synonymous with the common poor -- with the freckled faced kids, the roustabouts driving the stakes with three men and three sledgehammers ... It's the above aspects of a circus that I feel are all out of place on the Las Vegas Strip … After all, The Strip is supposed to be synonymous with a good looking female all dressed up in a very expensive diamond studded evening gown and driving up to a multi-million dollar hotel in a Rolls-Royce. Now, you tell me what, in that picture, is compatible with a circus in its normal raiment, exuding its normal atmosphere and its normal smell."[87]

However, Hughes' mission to fully convert the Strip into a more glamorous and upscale place was hindered by anti-trust laws. Hughes' monopoly game came to an end when he tried to buy Stardust. State gambling officials, backed by the United States Attorney General and the Justice Department, managed to block Hughes on antitrust grounds, claiming it would cause a monopolistic situation. A gaming commission member remarked on the general feeling of the attempted transaction: "I do not wish to see Las Vegas become a company town."[88] Hughes was frustrated and desperately tried to lobby, passing $858,500 of earnings from the Silver Slipper casino directly to Nevada politicians over a period of three years. Hughes, after tipping the Nixon administration as well, was allowed only to buy the Landmark in 1968 for $17.3 million, since it had never been open and faced financial difficulties, so that the state would benefit from Hughes' takeover. Thanks to Hughes' capital it finally opened on July 1, 1969.

The struggle to fund the Landmark is emblematic of how the corporatization of the Strip provided the necessary capital to enter the ever-more-competitive casino market. After securing a loan from the Appliance Buyers Credit, ground was broken in November

1961. But only 13 months after construction, the loan was stopped. In 1966, Caroll received a $5.5 million Teamster loan, but at that time, he aimed for building the tallest structure in Nevada. As a result of a height war with the Mint downtown, the Landmark's initial 14-story height was extended to 31 stories. [See Image 11] After being denied a gaming license twice, Caroll put his property, still a hollow shell, up for sale, until Hughes bought it and finished the project.

However, after failing to buy more properties and fully execute his vision of sanitizing Las Vegas in favor of glamour, Hughes quietly left Las Vegas in 1970 for the Bahamas – carried on a stretcher down the fire escapes, never to return again. [See Image 37] Even though Hughes was far from a casino innovator and had not initiated any new properties on the Strip, he was nonetheless an important figure for the Strip. He assisted in sanitizing the gambling industry, partly by bringing his team of Mormons and FBI into the management of his casino management and partly by burnishing its image as he lent his respectability to the Strip. Since Hughes had an impeccable reputation as a businessman, he played a crucial role in the transition of Las Vegas from a Mafia-financed to a corporate industry. He paved the way for corporations to enter the Strip.

The second significant event that enabled the transition from Mafia to corporate ownership was the passing of the Nevada Corporate Gaming Act in 1969. Before the new law, every stockholder needed to be licensed by the state to operate casinos, which limited the amount of investments. It effectively prohibited publicly held companies to own casinos, since a public company has numerous constantly changing stock "owners". With the new law, only the major stockholders or officers of the corporation required licensing. It enabled unprecedented amounts of capital to flow into the Strip, most notably from companies that were publicly traded on Wall Street.

However, the transition between the Mafia and the corporate regime of capital was long and painful. Only when the Las Vegas Strip finally secured access to corporate capital would Nevada authorities crack down on Mafia operators. The corporate gaming act did not instantly remove the Mafia; rather, it was a gradual process. For instance, while the legitimate Argent Corporation officially owned the Stardust, the real operator was the Mafia's Frank "Lefty" Rosenthal. Even in Hughes' casinos, Mafia operators were skimming money. In 1976, the Gaming Control Board finally raided the Stardust. Exactly one decade after the corporate gaming act, Rosenthal lost his gaming license. This dramatic event was portrayed by Scorsese's *Casino* (1995). It was a symbolic moment that represented the end of the Mafia era.

Kirk Kerkorian, a self-made man from California, took advantage of the new corporate gaming law first. He had made a fortune in aviation. As early as during the times of the Last Frontier, he launched a passenger service, flying junkets to Las Vegas. After selling his Trans International Airlines, Kerkorian publicly sold stock in a new corporation, International Leisure Corporation, of which Kerkorian's Tracy Investment Corporation owned 83%. Now Kerkorian had enough capital to leave a mark on the Strip.

The amount of capital necessary to enter the Strip had increased substantially. Caesars Palace had raised the bar for new resorts. "In the 1950's, you could start a little place,

with 150 rooms and a casino, but today you need 800 to 1,000 to attract attention. It's impossible with 150 rooms because you're competing with giants. You used to offer a 25-cent breakfast and a 99-cent lunch, but people demand the best now. They're willing to pay $5 for lunch. So it takes substantial capital to operate a joint," said Benninger, president of Leisure Corporation. Stocks brought in the capital necessary to be competitive in the resort industry on the Strip. Although buying stocks in casino resorts was a highly risky investment, it was potentially highly profitable. Leisure stock, since going public, surged from $5 to $50 within just half a year. This success brought even more public capital to the Strip, fueling the expansion of the industry. "[publicly held companies] They're flocking to Las Vegas … Couple this with growing leisure time and rising incomes generally, and a growth industry occurs," noted *The Los Angeles Times.*

Armed with enormous amounts of corporate capital, Kerkorian negotiated the land for his new megaresort in a dramatically modern way. The $5 million deal, then the largest land transaction in the state, was made over air-to-air telephones, while he and the seller were flying in separate executive jets. By then, he had already bought the Flamingo for $13 million, for the sole purpose of training the staff that would later work in the new resort. Kerkorian's project was not situated on the Strip, but on Paradise Road. About a block away from the Strip, it was right across the street from the Landmark that was now owned by Hughes. [See Image 38] Kerkorian was just as confident about the potential of Las Vegas as Caroll had been, who thought that Paradise, "the fifty-yard line of Paradise Valley",[89] located one block away from the Strip, could transform into a second Las Vegas Strip.

Kerkorian literally had big plans for his first new resort. He asked experienced resort architect, Martin Stern, to design his hotel with as only requirement that it was supposed to be big. "… and (Kirk) Kerkorian said, 'I want to build a hotel.' And I said, 'What kind of hotel?' 'A Big One',"[90] remembered Stern. Stern would design the first megaresort in Las Vegas: the International. It was gigantic in all aspects. With 1,519 rooms, it was the second largest hotel in the world, after Hotel Rossiya in Moscow. Its 30,000-square-foot casino was the largest in the world, while the 2,000-seat Showroom International had a stage larger than New York's Radio City Music Hall, hosting performers such as Barbra Streisand, Elvis Presley, and Liberace. A sign system was implemented to allow its 2,600 employees to navigate through the giant back-of-house. On top of this, it was built in record time, in only 18 months, thanks to more than 1,000 construction workers. [See Image 39]

The International aspired to be the tallest building in the state as well as the largest. The resort opened the same weekend as its neighbor, the Landmark. The *Los Angeles Times* noted the competition between Hughes and Kerkorian, headlining "Las Vegas Rivalry Escalates: Hughes, Kerkorian Put Hotels Back-to-Back".[91] The competition almost brought Hughes, who precisely because of this had opposed the liberalization of gambling law, into despair. Both resorts claimed to be the tallest building in the state. The Landmark prided itself of having 31 floors, one floor more than the 30-story International, which countered by claiming their 30 floors were actually a little higher, equivalent to a 37-story building.

Besides its gigantic proportions, the International departed from other casinos in terms of typology and style. Stern pioneered the modern megaresort, when he integrated the high-rise hotel towers, the parking garages, and convention and retail areas, all in one single structure. [See Image 40] Even the 8.5-acre recreational spaces were integrated, placed within the structure on a second-floor roof deck. [See Image 41] "Stern-derivative casinos, more structurally integrated than earlier resorts, brought the idea of self-contained pleasure palaces into a new era,"[92] noted Schwartz. The integration of all these facilities in a single unified structure would influence the resort typology for the next few decades. Rather than adding on separate buildings that each contained a specific function, such as a hotel tower and a convention space, mega structures would unify all these elements. Whenever expansion would be necessary, rather than adding individual components, the mega structure prototype was to be replicated in its entirety. [See image 42] In actuality, however, the Y-shaped building of the International would be elongated. Nonetheless, a few decades later, Stern's planned approach to expansion would be adopted widely. It further internalized the megaresort; where previously architectural program was located across the site, some publicly visible such as the pool, they were now all contained into a deck. The megaresort had increased the distance between the Strip and the resort.

In addition, Stern borrowed the Y-shaped plan of the Tropicana and extruded it to new heights. The Y-plan allowed more rooms on a square plot while enabling each room with a reasonable view. It would become the standard of later developments. As a result of the Y-shape, the resort had no main façade, and it was similar from all angles. The advertising later celebrated the architectural innovations, and it presented the project as a new step in the evolution of the resort: **"**Even as an idea, the proportions are fantastic. In one swoop, here's an embodiment of everything the Las Vegas resort industry has learned in the past ten years, its "modern" era. Here all the things it has hoped for, aspired to – the things that up to now it has only been able to make stabs at."[93]

In another departure from Strip casinos, the International was not themed, but built in a sleek modernist style, catering to a more upscale audience and, specifically, to business travelers. Because it was placed directly adjacent to the convention center and had a total of 75,000 square feet of meeting and convention space, the resort had an aesthetic with which a conventioneer would identify. Off the Strip, the International could afford to be of a style that was similar to corporate architecture in the rest of the United States. Even its name, the International, resonated with the International Style, the architectural style that had been equated with modernist architecture, characterized by its rectilinear forms and bare surfaces, stripped of ornamentation.

After WWII, international modernism had become the dominant style for corporations as well as institutions, in the United States and around the world. Like many corporations had adopted their headquarters in a corporate modern style, so had Kirk Kerkorian. The universalism preached by the International Style fit corporations need of being present in multiple parts of the world and different cultural and geographical contexts, yet still having a homogenous architectural style. At the same time, the lack of ornament and standardization helped corporations build cheaper and faster. The initially utopian project of the International Style had been commercialized. By adopting the International Style,

Stern strategically associated the resort with corporations and institutions, which gave the resort authority. Ironically, this was exactly the architectural style against which Robert Venturi and his colleagues had preached. Already before his manifesto was published, the Strip was headed into a different direction.

However, the International took the International Style as a theme; the resort was not actually a modernist building. Stern, an experienced Strip builder, looking for inspiration next to the convention center, had simply taken it as another theme, in line with Strip tradition. [See Image 43] For instance, all the different floors of the building, were themed in the style of a different country. The International "Brings the World to Las Vegas," claimed the advertising. "When you drive up to the new International Hotel, you begin a tour of the world. The flags of the free world are blowing in the breeze … And when you register, you receive an international passport. You may stay in Paris. Or Rome. Or Madrid. Each floor is done in international décor. French Provincial. Or Italian. Or Spanish décor."[94] Each restaurant had its own global theme. As national themes were stacked vertically, the International appeared as a vertical consumerist version of a world exhibition. There was a guard at the entrance that resembled a customs officer, flags of different countries monumentally stood in front of the property, as well as throughout the resort grounds, and people were given an actual passport upon check in. International modernism, in the context of the Strip, had been adapted for the resorts own purposes; it was taken as a theme. The irony, of course, is that this was perhaps more honest of what modernism was; while it preached to be without symbolism, purely driven by efficiency, effectively, it was not so. It took the symbolism and aesthetics of streamliners and modern industry.

Above all, the resort resembled the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Inaugurated in 1958, and designed by famous modernist such as Marcel Breuer, Pier Luigi Nervi and Bernard Zehrfuss, the sculptural and monumental building was highly influential in the more expressive branch of commercial modernism. Stern lifted his resort symbolically on the association with UNESCO, which was particularly useful next to an international conference center. However, while the UNESCO building was an actual modernist building, the International was not so. First of all, the Y-shape of the UNESCO building bore relationship to the surroundings. Specifically, it reacted to the context of the Eiffel tower, and formally stood on the opposite side of the urban axis Parc du Champs de Mars. Thus, the building was firmly embedded into the city. In contrast, the Y-shape of the International bore no relationship with the surrounding roads. Instead, it dislocated the resort further from its context. Moreover, the Y-shape of UNESCO was elongated at one side, whereas the Y-shape plan of the International had similar sides. As a result, the resort had no main façade, and it was similar from all angles. Perhaps, the resort could get away with this lack of directionality more easily since it was not situated on the Las Vegas Strip but on the still underdeveloped Paradise road. In addition, whereas the tripartheid structure of UNESCO hovered above the ground, built on columns, as a way to incorporate it into the context, the International, on the other hand, was floating above a podium, that further internalized the resort. So although the building appeared as international modernist, it was not actually so. In this respect, the International prefigured the fourth building boom, in which, again, elite architectural styles were used in the

context of the Strip. Beneath the style, however, was Las Vegas business as usual: an internalized resort.

Even though the International had a high modernist shell, it could still be interpreted as a postmodern building, but in a different way from Venturi. Jameson, as a response to Venturi's definition, discussed the 1974 Bonaventura hotel in Los Angeles as an example of a "postmodern hyperspace". He described it as "a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city."[95] Connected to the global economy through its highway infrastructure, but disconnected from the local context, it laid isolated in the city, with the goal of "transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself."[96] The International can be interpreted as such a postmodern building. Disconnected from the local context, similar on all sides, it is connected to the highway. Its internal organization, marked by architecture of disorientation and people movers, further dislocates people, and subjects them to an invisible authority. The only outside of the building, the podium deck, still lays within the mega-structure. It is a carceral city, decorated with the flags and imagery of UNESCO. It has no identity other than the corporate logo, which can be changed at will, subject to the permanent disloyalty of corporate ownership. And indeed, only two years later the International was renamed the Hilton. For the architecture, this change in ownership did not matter. Unlike the resorts of the Pop City era, the corporate modernist architecture easily matched the name of any corporation; it would have been a lot more difficult to rename Circus Circus into the Hilton.

Kerkorian's plans for Las Vegas were even bigger than the International, but he needed the capital first. In 1970, a historic signing between Kerkorian and Baron Hilton brought the International and Flamingo under control of the Hilton hotel chain, the world's largest hotel operator. It was the first time a major corporate hotel chain had operated in Nevada, thanks to the new corporate gaming law. "The purchase marked the first time a major international hotel concern had moved into Las Vegas, boosting the city's image as an international resort and convention Mecca,"[97] noted Stamos. The transaction just signaled the beginning of the corporate gaming age. With the money from the deal, Kerkorian acquired a controlling interest in MGM studios. In 1971, MGM announced it would "embark on a significant and far reaching diversification into the leisure field by building … the world's largest resort hotel in Las Vegas."[98] Kerkorian's Tracy Investment bought the struggling Bonanza south of the Strip and sold it to MGM. The Bonanza would be used, like the Flamingo before it, as a training ground for the management of the new resort. The $107 million resort would finally open in 1973.

Both the construction process and the resort operations were modernized. The resort was constructed using a "fast track" building process, in which materials that arrived on site were assembled immediately, rather than waiting for all the parts to be assembled one at a time. Even with the building process already on its way, drawings of plans and details were still to be refined. The process wasted many building materials and resources. In addition, a "slip forming" construction technique, which had already been tried out with the Riviera, was employed. The technique involved pulling a wooden, cement cast upward on a hydraulic mechanism, by using the weight of the cement that was poured into it. As a result, the structure rose at a rate of 15 inches per hour, 24 hours a day. These techniques led to the building of the largest resort in the world in only 18 months.[99] In

addition, the organizational challenge was enormous. The personnel director had to hire 4,500 people in just 94 days. “It was like building a small city from scratch,”[100] he said.

For the first time, the extensive use of computers, maintained by a staff of 22 technicians, facilitated resort operations. “When a guest has established credit,” said a casino manager, “and decides to move from one game to another, the computer tells us immediately the amount of credit extended. It is fast and accurate, and it also serves as a memory bank for all of our casino records of our customers.”[101] Casino bookkeeping, hotel reservations, and even food and beverage orders used computers. Each of the bars linked into a cash register that poured drinks in exact proportions after an order was entered into the machine.

Ironically, as corporations gradually phased out the Mafia, many patrons were nostalgic for the mob days on the Strip. Corporations modernized various aspects of the gaming industry, replacing one-way mirrors with computerized camera surveillance systems, mechanical slot machines with electromechanical and later electronic slot machines. In the Mafia era, a patron’s line of credit had been based on the casino manager’s estimation of his assets, which required a personal relationship between the two. When corporations modernized and computerized credit rating systems, this personal connection was no longer necessary. Casino employees no longer knew all patrons by name; corporate modernization led to a less personal and intimate atmosphere on the Strip.

Bringing back the Hollywood theme to the Strip, the resort derived its name after the 1932 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio film *Grand Hotel*. Since Kerkorian had purchased the MGM studios and owned all the rights to all the MGM titles, it was modeled after the movie. [See Image 44] The resort was called MGM Grand. Once again, Kerkorian hired Martin Stern to design his megaresort. Ironically, Stern had started his career as a sketch artist at the movie studios in Hollywood. He now found himself designing a resort that was slightly themed in Hollywood style. Room numbers were embossed on brass stars, hallways were decorated with celebrity pictures, and an MGM lion stood at the entrance. Stern also designed a gigantic 100 by 300-foot, eight-lane porte-cochere. Lit by incandescent lights, set in glitzy mirror-finish plastic fixtures, it celebrated the ceremony of vehicular arrivals, much like a movie premiere. [See Image 45] Kerkorian had finally executed Hughes desire of turning Las Vegas into a place “of a well-dressed man in a dinner jacket, and a furred female getting out of an expensive car.” Because of the many connections between the Strip and Hollywood, it was only time until the paradigmatic Hollywood ritual had gotten a formal place in Las Vegas.

Importantly, the MGM brought the final deathblow to the neon signage. It discontinued the tradition of the sign race. Ad-Art proposed a 207-foot sign, which would have been the tallest in the world, containing an 80-foot chandelier. However, its $700,000 price tag was considered too expensive. On top of that, Stern thought it competed with his building and porte-cochere. It was argued that since the MGM Grand was so gigantic, it could be seen from far away, and it no longer needed to rely on signage. The sheer size of the high rise functioned as a sign. Ad-Art had to settle for a 125-foot sign that was squarer, literally and figuratively. [See Image 46] Instead of the sign, the porte-cochere would become the new focal point of the resort. This new elaborate architectural feature, noted Hess, “replaced the road side in projecting the primary imagery of a Strip hotel.”[102]

The new typology of a high rise with a dramatic porte-cochere would become a paradigm for other casinos on the Las Vegas Strip, drastically changing the nature of the road. However, the port-cochere was dwarfed in relationship to the mass of the tower. No longer defined by the landscape of signs, a collection of porte-cocheres, behind which new mega-resorts towered, dominated the Strip.

In a way, it was the revenge of architectural mass. Venturi had only a few years earlier noted the postmodern reversal between signifier and signified, sign and building. He described Las Vegas as, “the victory of symbols-in-space over forms-in-space in the brutal automobile landscape of great distances and high speed, where the subtleties of pure architectural space can no longer be savored."[103] Now, the architectural mass of the corporate megaresort had superseded the lightness of the pop signs.

Finally, despite its modern facilities, the MGM Grand’s only real attraction was that it was huge. It was another self-contained mega-resort, but it was bigger than the International in all aspects. The 2,084 hotel rooms of the 2.5 million square foot resort were placed in a 26-story T-shaped tower. [See Image 47] Like the International, it fed off the lucrative convention market; it had 145,000 square feet of convention space. Moreover, it was the only resort on the Strip to have two major theatres, a 1,200-seat showroom from which Martin taped the “Celebrity Roast” television specials, as well as the Ziegfeld Room, which had a 100-foot long passarelle, able to accommodate up to 100 showgirls suspended from the ceiling. In addition, it had a movie theatre, a 75,000 square foot Grand Arcade, containing 24 shops, a 2,200 seat jai alai facility, and the largest casino in the world, with 1,000 slot machines. The resort eagerly boasted of its enormity, stating that it required more than 125,000 of square yards of carpeting, had drapery that could stretch from Las Vegas to Orange County, and it was furnished with 32,000 pieces of furniture and 42,000 hardware fixtures cut from 5,000 trees. Yet, compared to the other resorts on the Strip, the MGM Grand was quite boring: its theme was superficial, its architectural style conservative. It had none of the sculptural qualities that the International had ripped off from the UNESCO headquarters. It was simply big. Without the competition of similar size resorts, the sheer mass of the MGM Grand was enough of a status symbol already.

3.2.2 Hyperreal Logo Land

The corporatization of the Strip took full force after MGM Grand. Towards the end of the second building boom, the Strip went through a period characterized on one hand by expansion and the conversion from low-rise motels into high-rises. But on the other hand, a lull in new resort construction and a lack of innovation occurred. Corporations adopted a more conservative corporate and aesthetically safe modernist style on the Las Vegas Strip. As the Strip was being corporatized, so it would become mainstream; both the International and the MGM Grand helped standardize the Las Vegas vacation. In addition, gas stations, motels, and gift shops mushroomed on the Strip, feeding off the new influx of tourists, while adding their billboards to the Strip. However, the sign landscape of the Las Vegas Strip was no longer characterized by eccentric neon signs, but by square backlit whiteboard signs. Cultural critics did not appreciate this new corporate logo land; they classified it as “hyperreal”.

Corporate players thrived in Las Vegas. In 1973, the Hilton expanded with 1500 rooms, and by 1976, 43% of the revenue of the 163-hotel chain multinational came from their Las Vegas properties.[104] The corporations Holiday Inn and Ramada also did well, making great amounts of capital on the Las Vegas Strip. By 1980, the five biggest gaming companies in the state of Nevada - Hilton, MGM, Del Webb, Harrah's, and Caesars World - were publicly traded companies.

Although no new large resorts were being built, some smaller properties on and around the Strip opened, including the Marina and Holiday Inn-Harrahs in 1974, and the Imperial Palace and Barbary Coast in 1979. Moreover, the Strip did not stop developing and most of the casinos converted from low-rise motels to high-rise towers. [See Image 48] In 1972, the Flamingo added a tower that resembled an office building. In 1977, Tropicana replaced its iconic tulip fountain with an unexciting 22-story tower, part of a $50 million expansion program. Perhaps the most boring addition was the new 14-story tower of the Desert Inn in 1978. Clad with mirrored glass, it resembled a "corporate headquarters", according to Hess. It was a typical example of corporate modernism.

A more interesting expansion project was the 20-story tower of the Aladdin in 1975, which had some Moorish touches. In 1972, Circus Circus added a fifteen-story tower and, in 1975, a new port cochere and 126-foot tall clown sign, one of the last enigmatic signs, together with a 222-foott tall Sahara sign of 1980, also designed by YESCO. Bob Stupak, perhaps the last maverick in the corporate age, built Vegas World in 1979, and he decorated it with space age symbolism and a giant mural of an astronaut; but with only 102 rooms, it was nowhere near a threat to the corporate giants.

The lack of architectural innovation added to an unfavorable opinion of Las Vegas in the popular media. A *New York Times* article characterized the period of the 1970s and 80s on the Strip as an "uncool polyester dump".[105] Las Vegas was considered a retiring home for fading stars, where an overweight and drug addicted Elvis performed until his death in 1977, and the expression, "goin' Vegas", characterized the malady of entertainers past their prime, who performed on the Strip, because they had no other place to go.

In its defense, the casino industry on the Strip was under pressure. The legalization of gambling in Atlantic City, a big hotel fire, and two recessions did not create a climate conducive to building new resorts. The industry shivered when Atlantic City provided competition by legalizing gambling in 1976, breaking Las Vegas' 45-year monopoly on legal gambling. However, casino executives would soon learn that the increasing legalization in other parts of the United States over the years and the advent of online gaming would benefit Las Vegas, as it enlarged the market of potential gamblers, teaching them the games. The new pupils of chance would eventually make a trip to the undisputed gaming Mecca: Las Vegas. At the same time, Nevada casinos would still have a competitive edge over their out-of-state counterparts; since Nevada's property and gross gaming win tax was the lowest in the nation. Then, a big hotel fire in the MGM Grand in 1980, costing the lives of 87, added to the slowdown as well [See Image 49] Inspections showed that MGM, in its hurry to finish construction, violated many fire and building codes, which were overlooked by lenient county inspectors. An ungrounded wire caused the fire, which easily spread because there were no sprinklers. These mistakes were a direct result of the laissez-faire county policy. To make matters worse,

only 90 days after the disaster, the Hilton suffered a fire, costing the lives of eight. The speed by which the megaresorts were built had literally backfired. There were economic reasons for the slower development on the Strip as well. Banks were shy in providing loans to the casino resort, with a few exceptions: in 1979, the Chemical Bank of New York gave $135 million in financing to the Sahara for renovation. Moreover, two recessions added to the slowdown as well: the 1973 oil crisis, and the deep national "Reagan" recession of the early 1980's, which brought the high interest rates, did not encourage investors to develop.

There was only one new resort on the drawing boards. This was the terrace-sloped Xanadu, planned by Donald Trump and designed by Martin Stern in 1975. The Asiatic-themed 1730-room property married the megaresort prototype with a theme. It resembled the Acapulco Princess in Mexico, which was designed as an ancient Aztec pyramid. The Xanadu, with its spectacular 20-story atrium, could have offered the Strip a more interesting version of the megaresort typology. However, after an argument with the municipalities that required the developers to build an additional sewer line, the resort never got built. As a result, the Xanadu could not break lull of new resort construction on the Las Vegas Strip. It would take no less than 17 years for the two prototypes to merge in the next new megaresort on the Strip. Under corporate rule, the casino industry had first to go through a process of normalization to affirm the industry's respectability on Wall Street and to wait for better economic conditions, until new radical visions were to transform the Strip once more. They would again bring the road to the attention of architects and urbanists, although, this time, in a light not nearly as favorable.

Already in the late 1970s, cultural critics had a negative conception of the Las Vegas Strip, partly because of the new landscape of signage, but mostly because they had a different conception of the sign. After Venturi and others celebrated the neon signage of the Strip during the Pop City era, two European philosophers were more critical of the landscape of signs. Both Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard, touring America as modern equivalents of De Toqueville, theorized Las Vegas as a hyperreality, long before the city had actually reached its hyperreal climax.

The Las Vegas Strip that they wrote about was already different from Venturi's, since they arrived in Las Vegas about a decade later, when the enigmatic neon signage had turned into a corporate whiteboard logo land. The eccentric neon signage and its incandescent light bulbs were gradually edged out because of innovations in technology, rising energy costs, corporate logos and high rises, and evolving notions of good taste. First of all, corporate high rises obliterated the visual impact of the freestanding signs. Although neon had already died down in the rest of the country or, rather, been relegated to bars and nude theatres, neon still prevailed on the Las Vegas Strip until the 1970s. However, because of the 1973 energy crisis, resorts were forced to shut off their outside signs in response to Nixon's appeal. For five whole months, the Las Vegas Strip skyline did not light up at night, with the exception of the Hilton that had harnessed a horse to pump power from a generator into its marquee. Afterward, resorts reduced the number of light bulbs in their signs. This was possible because of the advent of acrylic plastics in the 1960s. Acrylics made sign faces translucent so that they could be backlit, obsolescing the technology of incandescent light bulbs on sheet metal that until then had illuminated the

painted messages. As a result, square-like backlit plastic whiteboard signs, with conservative typefaces, representing corporate logos, increasingly replaced the eccentric and elaborate neon lighting with their unconventional fonts. Kermit Wayne, one of YESCO's main sign designers, noted the difference. "There isn't as much neon – it's used more for highlighting now. And there's a lot more plastic. I really can't stand plastic."[106] [See Image 50]

More importantly, the cultural critics had a different conception of the sign. For instance, while Venturi saw the sign as a vernacular form, Eco was interested in the sign's broader process of signification. "Signs are not only words or images; they can also be forms of social behavior. Political acts, artificial landscapes."[107] Instead of seeing Las Vegas as a vernacular Pop City, Baudrillard and Eco saw it as a paradigmatic site of the hyperreal.

Hyperreality is primarily a media theory, building on the ideas of Marshall McLuhan, with its roots in semiotics and phenomenology. Common themes that theorists use to explain the condition of hyperreality include the increase of information production, the deterritorializing mechanism of capitalism in favor of a universal code of exchange, and consumerism's reliance on sign exchange value. But above all, it was argued that new media technologies that reproduced images confounded ways of distinguishing reality from fantasy. Hyperreality describes a condition in which reality that has been replaced with a copy reality: a world of pure signs that no longer refer to a signified or given reality. Hyperreality, in short, is a simulation of something that never existed. In such a world, all signs become meaningless.

The Italian semiotician and philosopher Umberto Eco first pondered about Las Vegas being a hyperreality. In 1975, Eco published his polemic *Travels in Hyperreality,* in which he was on the hunt for the absolute fake in places such as wax museums, a holography gallery, Hearst Castle, and Disneyland. For Eco, hyperreality is the American pursuit of the "absolute fake". He explains that the American taste for perfect copies and the absolute fake, as one of the main eradicators of reality itself. The hunger for the fake, he claimed, results in a reality lived by proxy. Hyperreality reveals itself in "the instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake...", and where "falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of 'fullness,' or *horror vacui*." [108]

Even Eco was not immune to the appeal of the fake. For instance, after having seen too many recreations of the Last Supper at the Getty, he was disappointed when he saw the real painting. It was no surprise that Eco thought about including Las Vegas in his quest. He considered the town as an example of an amusement city with "totally artificial" architecture, "studied by Robert Venturi as a new phenomenon in city planning, a 'message' city, entirely made up of signs, not a city like the others, which communicate in order to function, but rather a city that functions in order to communicate."[109] However, Eco realized that Las Vegas was still a "real" city, transformed into "a residential city, a place of business, industry conventions". Therefore, being only interested in the absolute fake, he decided to skip Las Vegas in his travels.

Baudrillard, like Eco, saw the American landscape as the paradigmatic site of hyperreality. But unlike Eco, Baudrillard did not skip Las Vegas. In his first book on

hyperreality, *Simulacra and Simulations*, published in French in 1981, he already referred to the city as a site of the hyperreal. In his later book, *America*, published in 1989, Baudrillard referred to Las Vegas once again.

For Baudrillard, late capitalism and technological mediation laid at the heart of hyperreality. Late capitalism, he claims, has shifted its focus from production to consumption. Consumption relies on sign exchange value rather than use value, because people buy into a product's sign value – a brand. This sign, produced by advertising, might refer to a real thing or use, but at a certain moment, will substitute for it. A condition of hyperreality emerges when these signs proliferate into a self-referential network – whether on billboards or television screens – that mediates experience.

One could argue that Baudrillard rejuvenates the Situationists' idea of spectacle with theories of signification and media theory under new conditions of the consumer society and the emergence of the television as a culturally dominant mechanism: "We are no longer in the society of the spectacle, of which the Situationists spoke, nor in the specific kinds of alienation and repression that it implied. The medium is no longer identifiable as such, and the confusion of the medium and the message (McLuhan) is the first great formula of this new era."[110] If the Situationists argued that reality is turned into a spectacle, Baudrillard extends this idea by claiming that the spectacle now has become a reality. If in the spectacle everything has moved into a representation, in hyperreality, everything has become a simulation; representation ceases to exist and all meaning is lost.

Since the Las Vegas Strip was the commercial advertising space par excellence, in which architecture ceded to a myriad of enigmatic signs, Baudrillard saw it as a hyperreality. Las Vegas was the "absolute advertising city", in which reality was substituted by advertising:

> "When one sees Las Vegas rise whole from the desert in the radiance of advertising at dusk, and return to the desert when dawn breaks, one sees that advertising is not what brightens or decorates the walls, it is what effaces the walls, effaces the streets, the facades, and all the architecture, effaces any support and any depth, and that it is this liquidations, this reabsorption of everything into the surface (whatever signs circulate there) that plunges us into this stupefied, hyperreal euphoria that we would not exchange for anything else, and that is the empty and inescapable form of seduction."[111]

Baudrillard argued that in the case of Las Vegas, the desert provides the ultimate condition for the hyperreal. Any form of human activity or built environment in the dry, uninhabitable desert must be hyperreal, he claims, since it is dislocated from the real: "The air-conditioned freshness of the gaming rooms, as opposed to the radiant heat outside. The challenge of all the artificial lights to the violence of the sun rays. Night of gambling sunlit on all sides; the glittering darkness of these rooms in the middle of the desert."[112] Because gambling is equally "inhuman", a "challenge to the natural economy of value," the desert reinforces the activity of gambling in what he calls "the secret affinity between gambling and the desert."[113]

Baudrillard's interest in Las Vegas was important. The darling of critical theorists, he brought the city once again to the forefront of theory. At the same time, his analysis provided the theoretical underpinnings of those studying the Las Vegas Strip. Specifically, when the Strip turned into a more literal form of Baudrillard's notion of a hyperreality, urban and architectural theorists would once again take an interest to Las Vegas. However, unlike the Situationists, whose concepts of alienation and reification still suggest a state of the non-alienated or non-commodified from which resistance can take place, Baudrillard's position led him to nihilism. Baudrillard and his *Simulacra and Simulation* did not pretend to be able to escape from simulation. For Baudrillard, there is no longer an outside in simulation; everything is simulated. Resistance, for Baudrillard, can only lie in indifference to simulacra. This explains his performance at the "Chance Event" at Whiskey Pete's in Primm, about 30 miles from Las Vegas, in 1996. The avant-garde event was organized in the Mojave Desert, since this is where Baudrillard had pondered about the nature of reality – where people tried to escape from it. Baudrillard, clad in a silver sequin jacket and backed by a rock band, read a difficult poem called "Motel-Suicide", which nobody understood. However, the happening made the front page of the *Los Angeles Times,* with a color photograph of the celebrity philosopher.

In his lesser-known career as a photographer, Baudrillard 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. [See Image 51] 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". There is no better image than the empty sign, an example of one of the "cracks opening in the illusion of reality",[114] illustrating the "emptiness" of the hyperreality that is Las Vegas.

Despite this "emptiness", by the end of the second building boom, Las Vegas had grown exponentially. In 1977, more than 10 million people visited Las Vegas. That same year, Clark County reported gaming revenue alone nearly doubled from five years earlier, to break the 1 billion dollar mark. [115] By 1980, the census counted almost half a million residents in the Las Vegas metropolitan area.

Even though in terms of architectural ingenuity and urban experience the corporatization of the Strip had initially been a step back, or led to the erasure of "reality", this did not matter to the Strip; it measured itself in economic success only.

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Chapter Four: Theme Park: The Disneyfication of the Strip (1985 – 2000)

4.1 Disneyland

4.1.1 Imagineering Las Vegas
4.1.2 Urban Eruption
4.1.3 Cartoon Castle
4.1.4 Classical Animatronics
4.1.5 Pataphysical Pyramid
4.1.6 D-Day
4.1.7 The Grand Salvo

4.2 Sim City

4.2.1 Adult Only Theme Park
4.2.2 The Gentrification of the Strip

"But for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence . . . truth is considered profane*, and only* illusion *is* sacred*. Sacredness is in fact held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness."*[1]

- Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*
(epigraph of Chapter I, *The Society of the Spectacle*)

During the third building boom, the Strip transforms from Disneyland to "Sim City". At first, resorts had taken over Disney-like qualities: urban theme park attractions and fantasy architecture had become the new wall of marketing. Halfway through the third building boom there is a shift from an architecture based on fantasy to an architecture based on simulation; resorts became idealized replicas of other places. By the end of the boom, the Strip had turned into a pedestrian boulevard filled with free theme park like entertainment, lined up with resorts that symbolized other places, whether imaginary or "real".

I claim that the shift from Disneyland to Sim City manifested itself in the architecture of resorts as much as their economic models. Disney was taken as an aesthetic and corporate model. And as resorts late became simulations of real places, so was the collateral financing increasingly detached from the real. On a whole, the "Disneyfication" of the Strip during the third building boom coincided with a national trend that assumed that image should become central in a place making strategy in order to attract tourists. If at the beginning of the 1990s images were taken from Disney, and resorts represented fantasy, many resorts in the last half of the 1990s referred to Old Europe. Those resorts

were replicas of other places; specifically, they evoked places of money, history, and culture, in order to appeal to an older and wealthier crowd, and demoted the Disney model to cheap and childish. In short, the Strip moved from the spectacle of fantasy to chic urbanity.

As a wave of Disneyfication happened throughout the United States, the process was particularly visible on the Strip. Disneyfication stands for a corporate model that relies on the principles of the Walt Disney Company: themed environments that defy the historical and geographical context, privatization, control, merchandising, corporate sponsoring, and corporate culture. On the Strip, the image becomes central in the design and manufacturing of resorts, with specialized companies that produce renderings, scripts, and manufacture three-dimensional replicated spaces. At the same time, resorts establish merchandising divisions and increasingly rely on corporate sponsorships and synergies. The Disneyfication of the Strip devalued the corporate modernist resorts of the previous building boom to boring. Corporations no longer assumed logos and modernist architecture to be enough; rather, they wanted their resorts to have entertainment value and theme park like properties in order to attract visitors. Themes were taken to their almost banal limits. It was a return to the total themed architecture of the Last Frontier Village, Caesars Palace, and Circus Circus.

Whereas the first wave of resorts represented the fantasy themes most commonly associated with Disney, in the Sim City age themes were literally one-to-one copies of architectural objects pillaged from other places. These resorts were in weird symbolic tension with their originals; rather than actual replicas, they were idealized versions. The shift from Disney to Sim City also manifests itself in a transformation in the financial system and investment structures in the production of the Strip. In the Sim City era, financing is based on more risky junk bonds and venture capital, often packaged in ways that obfuscate the real risk. This detachment ultimately forms the grounds for the upcoming crisis a decade later. A few decades after Baudrillard had theorized the Strip as a hyperreality, post-structuralism could never have been more applied to the Strip, as investment structures, as well as the Strip’s architecture, get lost in representation and become self-referential.

In short, during the third building boom, the Strip moved from the spectacle of Disney-like fantasy to the spectacle of simulated reality. As the Strip turned into an urban theme park, again, it caught the attention of architectural and urban theorists. But unlike the previous pop era, the new Disney-like Strip was despised as a hyperreal bastion of fake copies. Already before the Disney era, the Strip had been analyzed as a hyperreality. But when resorts incorporated exact replicas of other places, the diagnosis appeared more fitting. And so the city was theorized as a quintessential hyperreality, a city of simulacra and nothingness, a city as a theme park with a radical loss of public life, a cartoon caricature of a city.

4.1 Disneyland

The first phase of the third building boom is best described as Disneyland. Resorts refer to imagined worlds, literally appropriating well-known Disney themes. As a whole,

Disney applies to the entire corporate model resorts appropriate. Increasingly, gaming corporations rely on corporate sponsorships, merchandising, and corporate culture.

The Walt Disney Company is a multinational multimedia corporation that owns films, television channels, theme parks, and even sports teams. Particularly under the rule of CEO Michael Eisner, during the late 80s and early 90s, Disney expanded aggressively with theme parks, and it grew to become the largest media and entertainment conglomerate in the world. As a result, the Walt Disney Company is regarded as a major innovator in the global symbolic economy of entertainment, in terms of its design practices, corporate culture, and corporate strategies. In terms of design, the Walt Disney Company set a culture of consumerism through the orchestration and control of the built environment, practiced through its in-house design, engineering, production, management, and development team: Walt Disney Imagineering. At the same time, it managed to take advantage of corporate synergies, such as exclusive soda and Kodak film concessions, as well as sponsored pavilions. Finally, it nourished a strong corporate culture, incubated at the Disney University, which produced "cast members", workers as actors.

As the Disney Corporation expanded, particularly after the 1992 opening of Euro Disney that caused a media mania, there was tremendous interest in the Disney phenomenon by cultural critics.[2] This is the same time that the Disney days on the Strip reached their pinnacle. Critics start to recognize Disney as an important corporate model influencing American society and the rest of the world. Typically, the term carries pejorative connotations, despised as a banalization and commercialization of the cultural realm. This led Alan Bryman to adopt the term the *Disneyization of Society,* which, he claimed, carries less conceptual negativity.

Even though other terms could have coined the process, and other precedents were perhaps just as relevant, Disney gets the term. For instance, the 19th century world's fairs, amusement parks, the circus, and the panoramas, were much like the theme park resorts. There is little difference between the resorts built on the Strip in the third building boom, and Cairo Street at the 1889 Paris Exposition, or Luna Park at Coney Island at the beginning of the 20th century. However, as the trend resurfaces in the 1990s, and as Disney is one of the most visible and successful entity, it gets the tribute.

Critics saw Disneyfication manifested in the flourishing themed restaurant chains, such as Planet Hollywood, Hard Rock café, Rainforest café, and Harley Davidson Café; the themed malls, such as the Mall of America in Minneapolis and the Edmonton Mall in Edmonton, Alberta; and new themed neighborhoods, such as Seaside, Florida, and the Disney operated in Celebration, Florida.[3] Disneyfication also became a term that denotes an urban strategy in which urban areas are put under private management, and they are dominated by a simple communal image. Zukin notices this phenomenon happen in American city centers from the 1970s, "as conservative national governments reduced urban renewal funds and competition for private-sector investment discouraged local government from urban planning, this new public space." [4] Many city managers aspired to Disney as a model for public space. "Visual culture, spatial control, and private management make Disney World an ideal type of new public space."[5]

The canonical work that describes this new urban condition of the American city is Michael Sorkin's edited book, *Variations of a Theme Park*. According to Sorkin, the city as a theme park is: "ageographical", a "universal placelessness", with no relations to local cultural and physical geography; obsessed with "security", marked by enclave communities, security checks, surveillance, and segregated underground circulation systems of workers; a place of false consciousness, a "city of simulations, television city, the city as a theme park". Behind the process, according to Sorkin, lied the uniforming principles of global capital, mass culture, as well as the new media. Disneyland, claimed Sorkin, was not only television financed, it was *like* television. "Television and Disneyland operate similarly, by means of extraction, reduction, and recombination, to create an entirely new, antigeographical space… The highly regulated, completely synthetic vision provides a simplified, sanitized experience that stands in for the more undisciplined complexities of the city."[6] Sorkin claims that Disneyfication makes a city in purely visual terms, meant for visual consumption. The city is turned into a commodity, consumed as a spectacle. Travel through the Disneyland is much like a consumption assembly line, where bodies are managed trough people movers, lines, and security checkpoints. This city of transience is to be experienced in a constant state of movement, much like zapping through the channels of television.

Those who described the city as a theme park observed a peculiar influence on subjectivity. "The privatized city of bits is a lie, simulating its connections, obliterating the power of its citizens either to act alone or to act together,"[7] wrote Sorkin. Without a visible authority, Disney creates a landscape of order managed through lines, people movers, and an aesthetics that assumes civility and security of nostalgic past. People, claims Sorkin, are "manipulated", "mechanized", and turned into cartoon characters. "Mickey – hairless, sexless, and harmless – is a summary: as Disney once put it, 'Mickey is a *clean* mouse'… Mickey stand in the same relationship to human subjectivity as Disneyland does to urbanity." [8] The contradiction is that while Disneyland appears as public and differentiated, it is effectively not so. "The fascinating point is that Disney World idealizes urban public space," notices Zukin.[9] Hannigan, in *Fantasy City*, claims that the public looking architecture really is a compensation for the loss of public space,[10] or, according to Sorkin, "a substitute for the democratic public realm."[11] By taking the image of urban public space, a Disneyfied space hides the lack of actual urbanity. And while to some extent Disney is a utopia, a negation of reality, it is nonetheless rooted in real anxieties: the perceived chaos and danger of real urbanity.

Effectively, Disneyfication critiques built heavily on the media theories of predecessors Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard and Eco had already written about Disneyland in the 1980s. For them, Disneyland was a typical urban manifestation of hyperreal America, a symptom of a people who appreciate the fake because it appears as more genuine. For Eco, Disneyland is even more hyperreal than the wax museum, "precisely because the latter still tries to make us believe that what we are seeing reproduces reality absolutely, whereas Disneyland makes it clear that within its magic enclosure it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced."[12] Since Disneyland no longer refers to a referent, it is thus more real than the copy: a perfect example of the hyperreal. "Disneyland is really the quintessential essence of consumer ideology," since it sells

“genuine merchandise, not reproductions.”[13] Eco also saw Disneyland as a place marked by control, of a mobility orchestrated by people movers and lines. “Disneyland is a place if total passivity. Its visitors must agree to behave like robots.”[14] For Baudrillard, Disneyland’s is a “deterrence machine” that masks the “fiction of the real”. Disneyland is not a simple childish imaginary world; rather, it reveals the fact that the real is no longer real. “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyper-real and of simulation."[15] All of America, he claimed, had turned into a Disneyland.

Whereas Baudrillard and Eco assessed Las Vegas in the late 1970s to be a hyperreality, based on the amount of advertising billboards and neon signs, when the Strip turned into a Disneyland, it gave architectural and urban theorists an opportunity to theorize the Strip as the new hyperreal. Did Eco and Baurdillard deem Las Vegas hyperreal because it appeared to be a landscape of corporate signage? To architectural and urban theorists, the hyperreal assessment seemed more fitting when Las Vegas appeared like Disneyland. However, most of the critiques came in the late 1990s, after resorts started replicating actual rather than imagined places. Inspired by Baudrillard and Eco, architectural and urban theorists started to refer to Las Vegas as a bastion of fakeness, simulation, and consumption. More so, Las Vegas became, besides Disney, one of the epicenters of the phenomenon. Mark Gottdiener, in his *Theming of America*, considered Las Vegas the “theme park capital of the United States”, [16] the most visible example of a city affected by theming.

Like Disney had blurred the distinction between shopping and a theme park, Las Vegas Strip resort blurred the distinction between a theme park and gambling. The difference is that Las Vegas had moved oppositely: it went from gambling into a theme park. The initial Disney metamorphosis had helped shed gaming’s negative image. But as Mickey had helped to remove gaming’s stigma, it had also achieved something more cynical: it had made children familiar with gaming – much like the Ronald McDonald clown had given fast food a smiling face.

Whether this was an ulterior motive or not, there was great consensus on the Strip on the ability of a Disneyfied building to reel in new crowds. [See Images 55 and 56] Although most gaming executives followed the Disney paradigm, no one embraced it more than Steve Wynn, who in private as well as in public, nurtured the idea that Walt Disney was his personal hero. In addition, parallel to the Disney’s Imagineers, corporations on the Strip orchestrated the production of the image, sometimes even in direct reference to Imagineering. Often, plant types and facades were developed through a centralizing organizing principle: a floating image – the rendering – that was instrumentalized through companies that specialized in the production and fabrication of images. In contrast to the Fordist in-house production of Disney, it was a different arrangement of expertise; many procedures by which the corporate environments were themed were outsourced, perhaps because Disney-like theming was not native to the gambling industry. Typically, resort corporations produced the invariant structure of the resort, while multiple specialized companies develop the overall script and concept of the theme, plus design and build the supporting themed facades, attractions, interiors, and landscaping. This was a major

difference with the early days of the Strip as well. For instance, a single architect, Richard Stadelman, designed most of the new buildings in the Last Frontier Village.

Finally, it must be noted that before the third building boom there have already been connections with Disney, plus that the Strip had been "Disney" long before the original Disneyland in Anaheim in 1955. First of all, some of the sign designers of the Pop era had worked at Disney, such as YESCO's Jack Larson, who was an animator at Disney. Disney designers had also worked on Circus Circus. Even the little red star on the famous 1959 "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign was made in reference to Disneyland, which was only a few hours away. In addition, long before the third building boom had the reference between the Strip and Disney been pointed out. For instance, in his 1974 *Vegas: Memoir of a Dark Season*, John Gregory Dunne described Las Vegas as "an idiot Disneyland with lights". Then, the first theme park built on the Strip was built in 1943, the Last Frontier Village, which preceded Disneyland by more than a decade.

Regardless, at the inception of the third building boom, the re-theming of the Tropicana in the 1980s revived the architectural practice of theming and offered theme park like attractions on the Strip. The Mirage and Excalibur were the first two new resorts that were themed from the ground up. The resorts set a new paradigm of the themed megaresort, combining the typology of the megaresort and the concept of total theming. Other resorts would follow, and soon new themed megaresorts, as well as themed shopping malls, mushroomed on the Strip. As a result, the Strip itself became a tourist destination, and evolved into what appeared to be an urban theme park: a pedestrian boulevard filled with free entertainment.

4.1.1 Imagineering Las Vegas

Once again, an economic crisis lay at the bottom of the new paradigm shift. During the recession of the early 1980s, resorts on the Strip decided to reposition themselves. Moreover, corporations realized they could no longer rely on jurisdiction alone to attract visitors, since Las Vegas had lost its monopoly on legalized gambling. Riverboats, Indian gaming, and most notably Atlantic City threatened to eat into Las Vegas' gaming pie. In the face of this threat, as well as the recession, it was seen as logical for resorts to diversify their client base and position themselves more broadly as tourist destinations. Trying to expand their consumer base, resorts went after middle-class tourists. In particular, people that did not travel without their kids were targeted. Corporations decided to broaden their visitor base by positioning themselves as tourist destinations suitable for families. Competing for customers with theme parks such as Disneyland, resorts on the Strip appropriated theme-park-like aesthetics and design methods, such as Walt Disney's Imagineering.

As a result, the Strip's affordability and family friendliness were highlighted. Although the Strip had courted families before, most notably with the Hacienda and Circus Circus, it was never the general marketing focus on the Strip. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority, responsible for the marketing of Las Vegas, started to explicitly emphasize Las Vegas' affordability and appeal across income categories. Las Vegas was subsequently marketed as "Resort Bargain of the World" (1983), the "American Way to

Play" (1987), and "Always on the Money" (1991). James Cashman III, president of Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, commented on the strategic shift in 1987:

> "The industry has always recognized the family market and promoted it. It took the economic doldrums of the early 1980's to provide the incentive for a major marketing push aimed at a more diverse family market. Potential visitors targeted for the push were families and senior citizens--the middle class. The strategy was to focus on the city as a great vacation value, with inexpensive food and lodging, and amusements for people of all ages and income levels."[17]

More favorable economic conditions for the middle class helped fuel the third building boom on the Strip. First of all, ever since consumer interest rates had been deregulated at the end of the 1970s, more companies provided credit to high-risk customers with lower incomes, at the cost of an increased interest rate. With credit cards, more capital became available to consumers, and, despite the alarming increase of personal bankruptcies, they were willing to spend it. Secondly, as a result of the 1978 Airline Deregulation Act, air travel was getting cheaper, especially on heavily trafficked routes such as to Las Vegas. This enabled more of the middle class to fly to Las Vegas. Finally, as the baby boomers, the largest demographic, were getting older, they had more leisure time and discretional income than before.

The new focus on the middle class had several consequences for the Las Vegas Strip. First of all, it led to a different distribution of casino games. Slot machines started playing a much bigger role on the Strip. The middle class was more comfortable playing slot machines rather than table games. "While 15 years ago, slot machines were widely viewed – particularly on the Las Vegas Strip – as window dressing, or as something to keep the ladies busy while the men played the tables, gaming machines are now central to casino operations,"[18] noted *Casino Gaming Magazine,* a new professional magazine for the gaming industry, in 1986. By then, about half of the gaming revenue was generated in the slots department.

In order to attract the middle class and families, resorts needed a new image. Public companies did a lot more market research than individual owners had before, introducing corporate-style marketing. It took them a while to realize that architecture was an important facet of marketing, vital in bringing the Strip to the nexus of national attention. While at the inception of the Strip's corporatization, resort architecture was being normalized – its eccentric architecture ironed out in favor of a corporate modern style – a decade later, corporations came to the conclusion that resorts needed to be unique architectural objects with entertainment value if they were to effectively compete for tourists. It was a strategy borrowed from Disney.

The architectural approach of theming was considered the one-fits-all solution for adding entertainment value to a building. The Last Frontier Village, and Jay Sarno's Caesars Palace and Circus Circus, were not forgotten. At the same time, theming appeared even more relevant than before, since Las Vegas competed with tourist destinations such as Six Flags and Disneyland. Particularly, the Walt Disney Corporation was considered a

successful and innovating global entertainment company. Not only did the Strip literally co-opt its aesthetics, but it also appropriated its corporate strategies, such as merchandising and corporate sponsorships.

Casino designers had more subtle arguments for justifying themes however; a true theming paradigm existed on the Strip. *Casino Gaming Magazine*, a trade magazine of the gaming industry, hosted debates between designers on the issue, further cementing the paradigm. The architectural approach of theming was justified for the following reasons. First of all, it was assumed that theming added entertainment value to resorts, turning them into tourist destinations. After a property had been themed, the resort's architecture alone would merit a visit, much like celebrities once attracted visitors. "Themes have become a substitution for live Hollywood entertainment that was once very prolific in Las Vegas between show lounges and show rooms," [19] said Marnell of Marnell Corrao, the firm that themed many of the Las Vegas Strip resorts. The argument reminds of the reason behind Circus Circus' theme two decades earlier, which was Sarno's dissatisfaction with increasingly expensive celebrity performers. Then, theming was considered a useful "hook" on which to hang marketing programs. As resorts themselves would turn into destinations, the elaborate themes would self-generate publicity. "We consider casino design as a marketing tool for the casino operator … We're basically in the marketing business,"[20] said Yates Silverman of the namesake theme design firm. Finally, theming was considered less costly than more conventional approaches to architecture. Richard Rizzo, president of Mardian Construction Company, noted that "creating a marketing 'hook' through theming costs less than relying on high-quality architecture to increase a project's appeal."[21]

The re-theming of Tropicana signaled the comeback of the theme. Some marked it as a watershed event that signaled the beginning of the redevelopment of Las Vegas. Tropicana, like many other properties during the early 1980s, was going through a slump. It did not help that the resort was situated on the quieter south side on the Strip and was thus unable to rely on pedestrian traffic. In 1983, a plan was devised that introduced a theme called the "Island of Las Vegas", meant to bring in the middle class, and to shake off the Tropicana's high-roller image and nickname "Tiffany of the Strip". It was assumed that the South Seas-inspired theme would connect well with Middle America, not coincidentally because of the then popular ABC television show *Fantasy Island* (1978-1984). The remodeling involved the addition of a five-acre water park, a tropical forest with exotic animals, and more than 60 varieties of trees, including banana trees and windmill palms. The resort even had a fish and wildlife department. A *Casino Gaming Magazine* reporter described the scene:

> "The tropics theme extends to every section of the hotel and casino floor, manifesting itself not only in living foliage but in living – and even talking – creatures. A quick stroll around the Tropicana's casino floor reveals strategically-placed brass perches amid natural settings, on top of which sit chattering tropical parrots, macaws, toucans and other exotic birds. The talking birds have been taught a vocabulary that relates to the areas in which they are displayed. Strolling the outdoor area, one meets flamingoes, cranes, penguins, swans and other walking

birds. [22]

The “Island of Las Vegas” theme was held entirely responsible for bringing in new customers. The Tropicana’s management fully exploited the new theme by letting it star in the resort’s television commercial. As a result of Tropicana’s success, theming was heralded as the new paradigm by developers and designers on the Strip. Although the Tropicana was just a remodeling, it caused a domino effect: other developers eagerly jumped on the theming bandwagon.

When the formula of theming proved to be profitable to Wall Street, it would set the new paradigm on the Strip. As a result, Disneyfied architecture gradually edged out corporate modernism. Themed spaces started to pop up everywhere on the Strip. “During the 1980s … uniformity in casino interiors has given way to a trend which is still gathering steam – the head-to-toe theming of both new and existing properties,”[23] noted *Casino Gaming Magazine* in 1988. “It seems each client coming in is adamant to find a new idea—how can you have an integrated identity both inside and outside?"[24] said designer Klai of Marnell Corrao in an interview with the magazine. From the detail of staff outfits to the overall architecture scheme, the theme was to integrate and encompass all aspects of the resort. "Themes, in fact, go as far as the glass on the slot machines,”[25] observed the magazine. With total theming set as the new paradigm on the Strip, it was just waiting for the first new megaresort that was completely themed from the ground up.

The Mirage is credited with igniting the new resort construction on the Strip, typically characterized as the “Mirage phase”. However, the Excalibur had a tremendous impact on the Strip as well. According to Schumacher, both the Excalibur and the Mirage were equally responsible for launching the building boom of the 1990s.[26] They both helped turn Las Vegas into a tourist destination. More specifically, their notion of the resort as a family destination influenced other projects in the first half of the 1990s. But earlier resorts had entertainment options for children as well, such as the Hacienda and later Circus Circus. More precisely, whereas Excalibur’s Disney-like character influenced more the first half of the 1990s, Wynn’s vision of the high-end themed resort that was a simulation of another place would eventually become the main paradigm on the Strip during the second half, with the difference that children would be factored out of the equation.

4.1.2 Urban Eruption

The Mirage was the first themed megaresort on the Strip, breaking a silence of 17 years of new resort construction. Funded by a new source of capital, junk bonds, the resort introduced a tropical aquarium with sharks, an indoor tropical rainforest, a dolphin habitat, and a live erupting volcano to the Strip. The Mirage set an important typological precedent for the new building boom it helped launch. The volcano, that somewhat built on a tradition of urban spectacles on the Strip – such as the fountains of the Desert Inn, Tropicana, Caesars Palace, and Circus Circus – was imported straight out of a theme park. It set off a war between resorts played out in theme park attractions, live on the Strip, which drastically changed the nature of the street.

The man behind the project was Steve Wynn. Tracing the trajectory of Steve Wynn is almost like taking a cross-section through the history of the Las Vegas Strip. Steve Wynn quickly rose to the top in Las Vegas. His father, a compulsive gambler and operator of a string of bingo parlors on the East coast, brought his son to Las Vegas at the age of ten. After graduating from Penn State in English literature, Steve Wynn moved to Las Vegas in 1967. Thanks to his father's former business associates, Wynn got a 3% share in the Frontier Hotel, where he was a slot manager and assistant credit manager. However, law enforcement accused casino management of being a front of the Detroit mafia. Although Wynn was presumed innocent, he was forced out. By then, a prominent Las Vegas banker, Parry Thomas, had become his mentor. Parry helped Wynn set up a wholesale liquor company that supplied alcohol to the casinos. After selling the company, Wynn was able to buy a piece of Hughes' land south of Caesars Palace, with Parry's help, who was also Hughes' banker. Hughes never sold land, but Wynn convinced him he was losing money on the deal, since the land was under electrical wires. When Wynn uncovered his plans of making a small casino, Caesars executives, afraid of next-door competition, paid Wynn $2.25 million for the land, twice the amount it cost Wynn. Wynn used the profit from the lucrative real estate deal to buy a stake in the Golden Nugget in Downtown, and managed to stage a takeover. At the age of 31, Wynn became chairman and president of the Golden Nugget. He enlarged the casino and managed to attract a more upscale clientele, turning the Golden Nugget into a successful property. With his new profits he bought a piece on the other side of Caesars, this time to the north. On it, he built his extravagant vision of what he called the "New Las Vegas".

Wynn's grandiose vision for his first new resort on the Strip required him to tap into a new and bigger source of capital: high-yield "junk" bonds. Junk bonds are basically loans that are rated below investment grade and therefore offer higher interests. For investors, Wynn's new project was a risky endeavor. It so happened that junk bond king Michael Milken was Wynn's cousin's college roommate. Already in 1978, Milken had brought in $160 million of junk bonds to finance the Atlantic City Golden Nugget. For Wynn's new $630 million resort on the Strip, Milken supplied $565 million worth of high-interest loans. The deal heavily increased the debt load of Golden Nugget, Inc., the mother company, to the extent that the company had much more debt than other gaming enterprises. It was a tremendously risky endeavor; Wynn would have to make the Mirage earn more than $1 million a day to break even, to the skepticism of many.

According to Steve Wynn himself, who invented the myth that the media happily reproduced, he got his idea for the new resort, the Mirage, as a vision. Sitting on the front hood of the car, he was looking at the land he just bought on the Strip: "Suppose that what you see with your eyes is not what your brain tells you should be there. We're in the harsh, southern Nevada desert. Suppose you saw Polynesia, South Pacific, wouldn't that make people say: 'Could the inside of this place be as cool as the outside'?"[27] His mirage, rather than an immaculate conception, was based on a solid knowledge of resort architecture history. "Wynn is today the one figure whose knowledge bridges the past seven decades of Las Vegas gaming, because he knew all of the major people from the early days and knows all of the major people today,"[28] argue Las Vegas historians

Moehring and Green. Effectively, the Mirage combined the modern efficiency and scale of the megaresort with the total theme concept, marrying the two opposing visions of the third building era, while adding a new feature of a theme-park-like attraction on the Strip. The resort's theme and name had been tested before. Historically, resorts on the Strip had a history of invoking natural places, such as the Dunes, the Sahara, and the Riviera. Like the Tropicana, the Mirage's theme was inspired by the South Seas. Wynn took the name for his resort from an existing motel south of the Strip that had existed since 1955. After Wynn bought the name, the motel renamed itself to the less allusive and more descriptive Glass Pool Inn – the resort had a glass pool. Another important precedent was Caesars Palace, specifically the way in which the theme dominated all aspects of the resort. The Mirage's tower was Y-shaped like the International, but with 3,039 rooms staffed by 6,400 employees, it was even bigger. Finally, from the Acapulco Princess resort in Mexico, which Wynn acknowledged as an influence, he took the idea of an interior tropical rainforest planned in a huge atrium.[29] Wynn and his architects combined all these tested elements in a single building, but their innovation lay in adding a novelty: they plopped an erupting volcano into the Strip.

The erupting volcano was a theme-park-like attraction meant to reel in visitors. The $30 million feature orchestrated sounds of birds, rain, and thunder, as well as a piña colada scent that covered up the smell of the gas released by underwater jets that periodically spit fire in the surrounding lagoon, giving the illusion of an erupting volcano. Wynn thought that this feature would attract visitors – much like neon signs that had previously grabbed vehicular attention. A theme-park-like attraction seemed more logical than roadside signage, since the Strip had gotten increasingly dense, and pedestrians started to play a larger role. The Mirage was the first resort on the Strip that abandoned neon, and replaced it with a theme park as the new attention getter. "NO MORE NEON … Replacing the traditional neon sign associated with old Las Vegas, the new Mirage resort tempts visitors with multiple lagoons, waterfalls and a 54-foot volcano," stated the press release. [See Image 1] Neon had been on its retreat anyway, especially after Caesars Palace had introduced the first four-color electronic display, the "computerized electronic message center", built by YESCO in 1984. After two decades of dull corporate logos, the volcano had become the new neon, the pedestrian equivalent of the pop city signs.

In order to create the volcano, the Mirage relied on specialist companies, such as Rock and Waterscapes Inc., which had created a rugged volcano landscape. They made rocks by taking a mold of actual natural formations in nature. Reproduced as concrete panels, they were held together by a steel frame, with their joints covered up with chicken wire and plaster. A few layers of paint were added to achieve a "natural" rocky look. These procedures were typical to the production of theme parks, and were now being applied to the Strip.

The Strip had seen its share of signs and fountains, but it was hard to predict the effects of the volcano. Each explosion disrupted the traffic on the Strip. Already during the testing phase the volcano caused a major traffic jam. "People just got out of the cars and went over to see what was going on,"[30] said a limo driver. Also, Wynn was shocked when he saw a teenager climb into the water of the lagoon. With the volcano scheduled to

erupt, “He’s about to get third-degree burns in his crotch,”[31] said Wynn to a reporter. Wynn quickly had a wrought-iron fence placed around the lagoon and volcano. He also made a wider sidewalk to accommodate the gigantic crowds that the volcano managed to reel in.

The Mirage built on the tradition of using nature as an attraction, but made the nature look more “real” with fake plants. Around the volcano, 1,100 palm trees were planted, in addition to pine trees and flowers, which eased the transition from the Strip to the casino. Inside the casino, a 90-foot-high geodesic glass dome sheltered an indoor tropical rain forest. Rather than an authentic depiction, the Mirage offered a romanticized image of the jungle. Maintained by a horticulture staff of 60, the rain forest was an amalgamation of over 20,000 square feet of fake plants, in addition to real ones, as well as “mummified” trees – once alive but implanted with a steel rod and injected with formaldehyde in order to get them into a more exotic shape. A company specialized on replicating nature, Preserved Treescapes International, had replicated fake trees and balsamed real ones. The themed restaurants had further sanitized the jungle. “When you go to the Kokomo's restaurant you can really pretend you are in a rain forest jungle setting without the mosquitoes and the dinghy fever and the so forth you get when you’re in the real ones ... the fantasy is kind of a jungle effect that you don't find in nature and it’s really better as a consequence,”[32] said a designer who was sent to Bali for research. [See Image 2] The sanitized and romanticized jungle was deemed better; it was a typical manifestation of the hyperreal.

The dry Mojave Desert did not stop Wynn from introducing exotic species to his resort. A 20,000-gallon aquarium filled with sharks livened up the registration desk. A white tiger habitat showcased white tigers (the habitat was painted white, since it was assumed that white tigers would like white). They lounged around when time off from the Mirage’s signature show: Siegfried and Roy, a duo of German illusionists. [See Image 3] None of the shows of the Mirage relied on nudity; it was a deliberate bow to families. As icing on the cake – it was the most violent geographic clash of species so far – while the resort was already under construction, Wynn, after a swim with dolphins on a trip in Hawaii, decided to add a dolphin habitat to the Mirage. One year after the opening, the Mirage inaugurated an artificial coral reef with bottlenose dolphins, flown into the Strip in jets. “This place will always be changing, and we’ll always be adding things. This is a Disneyland,”[33] commented Wynn on the new addition. Like theme parks, resorts that aspired to capture the tourist were forced to add new attractions to bring in the returning customer.

The heavily themed Mirage turned out to be highly successful. Instead of the 100,000 people that were expected to visit the Mirage on the first day, the number was twice as high. Mirage’s revenue surpassed $600 million in one year, and Wynn managed to pay back the loan after only 18 months. Aware of its success, other developers quickly followed suit, causing a new building boom on the Strip. In this new boom, Wynn’s building typology became the blueprint for success. After the Mirage’s volcano, other resorts would offer theme-park-style entertainment as well – free for everyone to see,

right on the Strip. As a result, the Las Vegas Strip turned into a tourist destination in its own right, with tourists marveling over the attractions.

Unlike in Disneyland, where you need to buy a ticket to enter, the theme park attractions on the Strip were totally free. Just like the Last Frontier Village was free, called by Moore "an advertising method", so was the volcano effectively a marketing gimmick. Like some nickel and dime machines lose money on running costs, but draw in crowds that spill over to more profitable parts of the casino, so did the volcano supply the casino with a solid stream of theme park revelers.

4.1.3 Cartoon Castle

Even more so than the Mirage, the Excalibur had Disney-like qualities. Completely themed in an Arthurian style, the resort resembled Disney's Cinderella castle from the outside. On the inside, faux facade interiors, derived from movie sets, and live performers added to the medieval atmosphere. The Excalibur was not a copy of a real castle, but a reflection of a castle as it exists in the popular imagination. Rather than an actual castle, the resort was an imagined castle, a perfect embodiment of the hyperreal: a cartoon castle.

Within seven months of the opening of the Mirage, two new resorts saw the light. First, the Rio opened off the Strip on Flamingo Road, catering mainly to locals. More important was the inauguration of Circus Circus' Excalibur, south on the Strip. The Excalibur was entirely financed through cash flow of Circus Circus Enterprises, taking only a $100 million debt on the project – an amount that seamed meager compared to the Mirage. Even though the project had more rooms than the Mirage – a new world record of 4,032 rooms – it cost only $290 million to build, hundreds of millions of dollars cheaper than the Mirage. Like the Mirage, the Excalibur was going after families and baby boomers: "We're appealing to the baby boom generation who want to bring their children and to the elderly who, for the first time, have time, money and their health," [34] said Glenn Schaeffer, president of the company. But the Excalibur was after a different market segment, as it offered a lower end alternative to the Mirage.

Excalibur meant to provide guests with a nostalgic escape to medieval times. Quite literally, the Excalibur took Disney World as its referent. "We're professional managers building one-of-a-kind, must-see entertainment mega-stores," said Schaeffer, president of Circus Circus. "That is what is going to turn Las Vegas into the next Orlando."[35] A lot of research was put into the Arthurian theme of Excalibur. Even the name, Excalibur, was chosen through market research out of 200,000 entries from the public. The theme's potential to draw customers was explored as well. Circus Circus had done some homework: "It is estimated that nearly seven million American participated in festivals celebrating the Middle Ages in 1989. The romance and simplicity of the seemingly less-complicated era appeal to people whose lives are increasingly pressured and complicated in our modern, technological society."[36] The rationale behind the theme was to give guests a nostalgic release to past times. As such, the Excalibur was supposed to *transport* guests into a fantasy world, where they could escape from mundane reality. "The hotel … will transport guests back in time to the days of knights, fair maidens, jousting, and

feasting," stated the press release. "People want total fantasy, a release from everyday reality,"[37] claimed Schaeffer. Like Disney World, Excalibur presented a world of make-believe, in which visitors were expected to temporarily suspend disbelief – and, with their critical faculties down, so was the assumption, they would be more inclined to spend money.

Although the Excalibur was based on actual castle research, realism ceded to a cartoon version of a castle. The theme was thoroughly researched before it was executed. Architect Veldon Simpson and Circus Circus executives toured European castles for ten days in order to find the appropriate architectural expression. Ideas were drawn from more than 300 castles they saw. At the same time, they also visited Canada's Edmonton Mall, the proposed Mall of America, and various theme parks and renaissance fairs to establish the various components of the Exalibur.[38] Based on the images of this research, the new resort was composited. "The result of our research was a medley of castles that make up the appearance of Excalibur. We borrowed from various era of castle design – from as ancient as the medieval period to as modern as the last century,"[39] said Simpson. The problem lay in that the program, as well as the size of the resort, did not prove itself that compatible with the historical research. For instance, the 4,032-room Excalibur was a lot bigger than any castle that had previously existed. "The challenge is to create the authenticity of a castle at a scale that no actual castle ever approached," [40] said Simpson. He implemented a "castle-within-a-castle" scheme as to allow for more height. In order to proportionally match the huge scale of the buildings containing the rooms, the towers, the battlement and the drawbridge over the moat surrounding the fortress, were over-scaled. As a result, the castle looked proportionally out of scale, making Excalibur look more like a caricature of a castle. More than an actual castle, Excalibur resembled Disney's Cinderella Castle, a Disneyfied castle. [See Images 4 and 5]

The idealized caricature, not the authentic depiction of medieval times, prevailed in the interiors as well. Inside the casino, an atrium with a multi-colored fountain and a royal "village" offered an equally romanticized image of a medieval scene. [See Image 6] Medieval shops and booths were placed behind faux facades like movie sets, permanently congealed in a "night sky feel, like a village at night". [See Image 7] Finally, all of Excalibur's restaurants were themed in medieval styles imported from different countries and legends, such as the Round Table Buffet, Robin Hood's Snack Bar, Sir Gahalad's, and Oktoberfest. The interiors were more based on medieval sets of movie studios than on actual castle interiors. "We were basically looking for the same level of design that you find in film," said Michael Erickson, design director of the interior design firm Yates Silverman. "If you designed rooms as they literally looked during the traditional period, they would be dark, dingy and dirty. You have to romanticize it a little bit and take more of a theatrical approach."[41]

Employees' performances and costumes were subjected to the exoticized medieval theme as well. Twenty-five entertainers strolled the castle grounds, including magicians, jugglers, a belly dancer, a contortionist, and a harpist. Almost all of Excalibur's employees wore a medieval garb that looked like authentic medieval costumes, were it not for the sequins and modern fabric. "We've made it a little Las Vegas,"[42] said the

creative producer. The Excalibur, a Disneyfied version of a castle, sanitized those elements that potentially disrupted the culture of consumption, while romanticizing those that could enhance it.

But, different from Disney, the faster speed of building on the Strip leveled off the quality of the themed environment. For instance, when Bennett, the majority shareholder of the publicly traded company, drew a sword from a stone at the groundbreaking ceremony to kick off construction – an inaugural ritual that matched the theme - the design was still not finished. Like MGM Grand, the Excalibur was another "fast-track project", built at record speed. As the foundations were being laid, the interior was still being designed. This was not conducive to the refined execution of the theme. Whereas the Excalibur looked good from afar, from up close, its lack of detail made it seem unreal; its oversized elements appear uncanny. The Excalibur had superficially appropriated Disney aesthetics without fully taking them through, because it knew that in the context of the Strip, it was bound to expire soon. Unlike in Disneyland, a monopolistic environment without internal competition, on the Strip, in the face of direct competition, buildings become obsolete as fast as they are built.

Themes on the Strip exhaust a lot quicker than in monopolistic environments such as Disneyland. Both the Strip and Disneyland have to deal with the problem of repeat customers, since people that have already experienced the theme might be bored to experience it again. But at the Strip, there exists an additional problem. Symbolic battles between resorts often led resorts to appropriate each other's themes, which made the customer grow tired of them even faster. As a result, there was a constant process of re-theming on the Strip, in which casino spaces were "rewritten". In addition, more than in places like Disneyland where there was no internal competition, resorts were eager to use the latest technology, special effects, and fashionable colors. But technology gets obsolete rapidly, as people's exposure to television and technological advances makes them blasé to what is outmoded, and color palettes date quickly. The irony is that, even though resorts use images from history that exude timelessness, permanence and endurance – a medieval castle for instance – the Strip resorts are really fleeting, planned for obsolescence.

4.1.4 Classical Animatronics

The two new themed megaresorts had changed the rules of the game on the Strip; they devalued the smaller and less themed properties. "There's going to be a stakeout," said Schaeffer. "The rich will get richer and the poor poorer. You can't compete today without some kind of identity."[43] Huge pedestrian crowds, fascinated by their novelty and attractions, gravitated towards the new megaresorts. Excalibur had moved the center of strip southwards, to the advantage of neighboring resorts the Hacienda and the Tropicana. They hoped to benefit from the new heightened attention at their intersection, whereas resorts on the north end suffered. Caesars Palace needed something to counter the two new megaresorts: a mall as a theme park.

As themed malls popped up all over the United States, it was only waiting for one to make its way to the Strip. In 1992, Caesars Palace introduced a Roman-style shopping

center, the Forum Shops. By placing a full-fledged mall in the casino complex, Caesars could benefit from the synergy of the two programs: visitation to the mall customers could cross over into the casino and vice versa. Blending retail with entertainment, the Forum Shops introduced a faux blue sky and moving statues to malls on the Strip. Caesars literally connected the mall to the casino by deploying people movers that reeled people off the Strip, away from the volcano, into the mall.

The 240,000-square-foot, $110 million mall represented a shift, first of all in terms of scale, luxury, and offerings. Although MGM Grand had a promenade of retail shops, and Caesars had already an Appian Way to its casino, inspired by Roman streets and a collection of upscale boutiques and celebrity restaurants, the Forum Shops were much larger. The Forum Shops accelerated a trend that was happening on the Strip. Retail had started to play a bigger role in Las Vegas, since the Howard Hughes Corporation built the Fashion Show Mall south of the Frontier Hotel in 1981. In addition, the Forum Shops sped up the fine dining trend as well, bringing in the first celebrity chef to the Strip: Wolfgang Puck.

Moreover, the Forum Shops were different, because they blended retail with entertainment, introducing a faux blue sky and animatronics to malls on the Strip, plus because it was outsourced to an outside developer. Developer Simon Properties Group assumed the context of the Las Vegas Strip required a different type of mall. Shoppers in Las Vegas, they thought, needed to be entertained. It led to a new hybrid that resulted from the cross-programming between a theme park and shopping mall – a form of "immersion shopping," or "experiential retail." "Theme-makers" Dougall Design Associates were hired to design the Forum Shops, and used Disney design strategies – Imagineering – to develop the mall. "The newest landmark in town could have come from the imagination of someone like Walt Disney," boasted the press release. "Picture a scene straight out of ancient Rome, authentically recreated with grand towering statues rising up beneath a postcard-perfect sky. Then as if by magic, statues come to life, lights and music fill the air and the sky above miraculously changes from a brilliant blue to a rosy dusk." It was not the first time that resorts on the Strip commodified history – in this case, the Roman Forum. Animatronics and faux blue skies were new. The hand-painted blue-sky ceiling changed from day to evening mood in a continuous cycle. Other design tactics not unusual to theme parks were the curving streets, lined with Corinthian columns, with end points that were out of view, as to create a sense of discovery in the Roman *via*. In addition, faux finishes made the mall look old. The mall's *piazzas* featured giant audio-animatronic Roman statues that came to life every hour, accompanied by laser shows and lightning storms. [See Image 8] Such strategies were common to theme park design, and indeed, many of the designers who worked on these properties were experienced theme park designers.

The Forum Shops turned out to be very successful; it was the most profitable retail space per square foot in the United States for most of the nineties, and it still was in 2007, with $1,300 in sales per square foot – well above the $341 national average.[44] The corporate synergy between the resort and retail industry explains some of this success. People who are on vacation, or people who win at the casino, are more inclined to shop. Furthermore, since the Las Vegas Strip is a 24-hour environment, shops can stay open longer than in

other parts of the country. At the same time, casino operators benefited from the spillover to the casino generated from the foot traffic. In addition, the rent paid by the individual store-owners “insulates” the often volatile casino revenue. When the mall in its entirety is developed and, or, operated by an outside entity, it further reduces the risk on behalf of the resort company.

The success of the Forum Shops caused Caesars to expand its retail area gradually. Ever since the Forum Shops, all casinos would integrate a large retail component in the casino complex, including large upscale indoor malls, many of them decked out with faux skies and animatronics. Most of the other resorts established merchandising divisions as to provide a mix of shops at their properties, as well as to develop logo products such as key chains and mugs. The latter was another trend that was started by Caesars World, when it started a Caesars exclusive product line in 1986, selling T-shirts, hats, glassware, and even men’s and women’s fragrances under the brand of Caesars.

As shopping became an integral part of the casino experience, it has been credited as partly responsible for bringing in more affluent customers, specifically international visitors who like to spend on retail, taking advantage of the exchange rate. According to the LVCVA visitor profile, in 1993, 12% of the visitors made more than $80,000, a number that nearly doubled to 23% in 1995. When resorts noticed this new wealthy demographic, the Strip would evolve once more, which ironically meant the undoing of the Disney theme. Just a few years before its demise, the Disney era reached its symbolic peak.

4.1.5 Pataphysical Pyramid

At the peak of the building boom in 1993, a true theme war broke out on the Strip. Within only nine weeks, three new megaresorts opened. Each was totally themed after contemporary iconography, featuring family-friendly attractions as if imported straight from a theme park. The new resorts fought over symbols, trying to outdo another, as well as to exhaust symbols and themes introduced by others. The main factors behind the war were three different publicly traded corporations. Circus Circus Enterprises, Mirage Resorts, Inc., and MGM Grand, Inc. were engaged with another in a severe battle of images. The first strike came from Circus Circus, specifically with their project “X,” which was a perfect simulacrum.

Circus Circus Enterprises delivered the first salvo in the theme wars. It revamped the neglected Circus Circus with a $90 million revitalization injection in the form of a theme park: the Grand Slam Canyon. In case the five-acre Grand Canyon-inspired theme park would go unnoticed, it was housed in a bright pink space-frame dome. [See Image 9] The location of its entrance – through the casino – revealed the true goal of the attraction: to get more people to gamble.

Circus Circus Enterprises’ main weapon was the highly classified Project “X”. The $375 million scheme was funded entirely from Circus Circus’ free cash flow; unlike Mirage, the company had very little debt. The project was aimed specifically at Mirage’s high-end

customers. Project "X", a code name for Luxor, was kept under the radar, as to prevent the competition to pre-empt its strike. New projects on the Strip were increasingly given code names. Since architecture played such an important role in the competition on the Strip, details of the new properties were deliberately kept secret as long as possible.

Investors and financial analysts paid close attention to the design of the resort. Two weeks before the opening of the Luxor, after seeing the design, one analyst commented on how well the resort would do long-term, "given the uniqueness of the casino and the interior space and the amount of diverse attractions."[45] As a result, and in anticipation of the opening of other newly planned resorts, corporate stock of Circus Circus Enterprises, Mirage Resorts, Inc., and MGM Grand, Inc. surged up to 147% up from the end of the previous year. Wall Street's approval of the new architecture of the Strip, expressed in the exponential growth of the value of the stocks, would only lead to more investments. Banks were delighted with the new attraction. After Luxor opened, Circus Circus Enterprises obtained a $750 million in unsecured bank credit from Bank of America - the largest line of bank credit ever made to a gaming company.[46] When it opened, Circus Circus became the most important gaming company on the Strip, as well as Nevada's largest employer with 18,000 workers. Circus Circus' salvo had landed sending a massive shock wave down the symbolic landscape of the Strip – but the battle had only just begun.

Although the Luxor was modeled after the Sphinx of Giza, it only evoked the idea of a pyramid; it was not one actually. It was built as a glass black pyramid with a laser beam shooting out of the top, fronted by a 10-story sphinx, one and a half times bigger than the original. [See Image 10] Instead of interpreting the phallic beam of light of the resort closest to McCarran airport's descend path as a potential threatening blinding light to pilots, the Department of Aviation and the Federal Aviation Administration classified it as an actual navigational aid. [47] The layout of the rooms was radically different from other resorts. Typically, resorts have a double-load corridor slab typology. The typology of the Luxor resembled the unbuilt Xanadu that Stern had designed. Rooms overlooked a giant atrium rising all the way up to the apex of the pyramid – which became an infamous suicide spot on the Strip. [See Image 11]

Architects, movie producers, science-fiction writers, and special effects designers joined forced to design a "vehicle" that "transports" visitors to "extraordinary and mysterious places of times past and future." Boats, in a replica of the river Nile, sailed guests from the registration desks to the elevator lobbies in the four corners of the pyramid, where elevators traveled at a 39-degree angle up the slope of the pyramid. Conceived as an "'archeological dig', where the mysteries of ancient Egypt are revealed as though in a state of 'excavation'," passengers on the "river voyage" will view architectural scenes from Egyptian periods between 4000 B.C. to 300 B.C., including a full scale reproduction of King Tut's tomb. "Authentic copies" of original hieroglyphics and ornaments taken from Egypt decorated the casino. [See Image 12] Luxor's entire upper lobby level was dedicated to the future. It had a high-tech arcade, "Virtualand", a "theme park of the future", with motion machines and time-travel rides designed by the effects creator of *Back to the Future.* It was another gesture to families, building on America's new-found

fascination with computer games.

The Luxor embodied the perfect simulacrum. AlSayyad uses the Luxor to comment on the hyperreal interpretation of Las Vegas. He distinguishes between the fake authentic, a city like Santa Fe, and the real fake, Las Vegas. Santa Fe respects tradition and builds adobe style buildings, strictly regulated by design committees. But they are not actually adobe buildings; they are wood-frame buildings that appear as adobe, which explains why the city has been dubbed "Santa fake". In Las Vegas the fakery is blatant. For instance, the Sphinx does not pretend to be real, and it is an authentic fake. Like Santa Fe, the Las Vegas Sphinx seeks to exploit cultural heritage, with the difference that "any claim to the reality of history is clearly secondary to its potential to generate commercial profit."[48] But even as tourists are well aware of the fakery, this still leads to a hyperreal situation. AlSayyad explains this in an encounter that he had with an American academic in front of the Sphinx in Giza. "Oh, but it is so small," the academic said. It so happened that the academic was a professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and he was accustomed to parking his car in a lot facing the Luxor Hotel. Since the entrance of the Luxor has a sphinx that is one and a half times the size of Giza sphinx, the result was that the professor became disappointed when he saw the original sphinx in Giza, "not because the reality did not live up to its image, but because along the way, the reality ceased to be relevant when the image became the principal frame of reference."[49]The real pales in light of the blatant fake, as long as it is more spectacular than the real. [See Image 13]

When the Las Vegas sphinx becomes the frame of reference of the Great Sphinx of Giza, we arrive at what Baudrillard would call "the fourth order of the image": the simulacrum that precedes the original. Disney is still of a third order, its imaginary spaces operating as a proof of the real, trying to feign the fact that there is no reality or original out there. The Luxor no longer 'dissimulates': it is a complete simulation, the ultimate hyperreality. Baudrillard, in order to explain the condition of hyperreality, referred to a Borges fable in which cartographers had drawn a map that detailed, that it covered the territory of the empire entirely. Whereas in the fable both the map and the empire decline together, in the hyperreal the representation had become the real, and it is no longer possible to distinguish between the two.[50] The Las Vegas sphinx is like Borges' map that precedes the territory, collapsing the difference between the representation and the real. In fact, simulation is a reversal of this signifier/signified binary in pataphysical fashion. "Pataphysics", the absurd science that so much influenced Baudrillard, was defined by Jarry as "the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments." Because the reality of a representation defines people's perception of the real, the simulacrum is not to be dismissed. Even though people know the Las Vegas Sphinx is inauthentic, it does not matter to them. Pataphysics and the simulacrum show us that the ontological distinction between representation and reality is fictional; they coexist in the phenomenological realm of subjective experience, which is based on images anyway, whether derived from representations or the "real". And besides, no building is ever completely authentic, or not conceived. The "original" Great Sphinx of Giza is a simulacrum too, since it takes the image of a lion imported from Greek mythology, while actually being the monument of a

king. Like the Las Vegas Luxor, the Great Sphinx of Giza was a perfect simulacrum, a pataphysical pyramid.

4.1.6 D-Day

The theme wars reached their climax on D-Day, October 27, 1993, when Wynn dramatically coincided the opening of his newest Imagineered resort, Treasure Island, with the implosion of the Dunes. It was the most publicized ever event for a new casino resort that had come as close to Disney as possible. In this enigmatic moment, the Pop City era the Dunes had initiated, gave way to the Disney era: a theme-park-like attraction shot down the towering Dunes sign.

Part of an overall scheme, Treasure Island was conceived as a sister tower to the Mirage. Directly located next to the Mirage, it absorbed its overflow as well as provided a lower-end alternative. While Circus Circus Enterprises attempted to get a share of high-end Mirage's market with Luxor, Wynn intended Treasure Island as an assault on Circus Circus' middle market. The $430 million Treasure Island, mainly financed in the high-yield junk bond market by selling $300 million worth of first-mortgage bonds, was cheaper than the Mirage. The moment the Mirage's impact had been stabilized in the market, Treasure Island was scheduled to open. This scheme of two sister towers would be repeated on the Strip. It represented the next step in the evolution of the megaresort. The two-tower scheme offered a way in which a company could grow its consumer base in different market segments, without diluting the brand, while at the same time taking advantage of economies of scale, by sharing facilities and management. The next scale up from the megaresort was simply its doubling.

With Treasure Island, Las Vegas visibly competed with vacation destinations, such as Disney World. "The evolution of Las Vegas puts us in direct competition with other cities of a similar nature," said Wynn. "Las Vegas now offers exciting destinations, which rival Orlando, Southern California, and the major resorts of Mexico, the Caribbean, and the South Pacific."[51] In direct competition with Disney, Treasure Island appropriated its aesthetics. It turned out to be the Strip's most Disney-like property. Steve Wynn even saw himself as a personification of Walt Disney, and he liked to share this with anyone who would hear it. "I'm more of a Disney person than a casino guy," he told a *New York Times* reporter. "This is what's gonna protect Las Vegas in its next generation--the fact that we're not building little dumps with casinos anymore, we're building fantasy resorts"[52] Rather than a casino operator, Wynn portrayed himself as Walt Disney, with Las Vegas as his protégé.

The resort's theme, Pirates of the Caribbean, was chosen for several reasons. First of all, it blended in well with the tropical theme of next-door Mirage. Moreover, it was assumed that the pirate theme would specifically attract men; "Treasure island is a haven for every pirate," was the resort's slogan. In addition, pirates were popular, especially since Steven Spielberg's blockbuster *Hook* (1991). Finally, Disney had already tested the pirate theme.

In fact, the last ride Walt Disney designed before his death was the Pirates of the Caribbean at Disneyland.

Treasure Island overtly co-opted Disney's method of design, called "Imagineering". "When we did Treasure Island, we did it in the strictest rules of Imagineering set about by Walt Disney," [53] said Roger Thomas, interior designer and son of Parry Thomas, Wynn's former banker. What is specific about this design method is that it is centered around "storytelling" – a disciplinary crossover from Disney's movies. All elements of the resort were subjected to a single defining narrative, the central theme, and needed to communicate part of the story. The role of the story was twofold. On one hand, it told the story of the space to the general public. Rather than guessing about the architect's artistic or philosophical intentions, an Imagineered design followed the simple narrative of a theme that could be easily understood by mass audiences, with the assumption it would entertain them more and *transport* them to different times or spaces. Secondly, the story, explained in a simple sketch or script, was often treated like the "mission statement" that mediated all aspects and phases of the design process, from space planning to exterior and interior decorations.

This new method of design downgraded the role of the architect beneath conceptual designers. Set designers and script writers were considered better equipped than architects in the art of "scripting" and "storytelling", able to maintain the consistency and authenticity of the theme. Many of the theme-design firms – most of them from Southern California – hired scriptwriters, conceptual designers, production designers, and costume designers. Most often, the architect's role was demoted to making the story "real." In the case of Treasure Island, the architects – Wynn's in-house design firm Atlandia – were relegated to developing the layout and construction details of the 36-story, 2,900-room X-shaped tower and facilities. The theme, on the other hand, was developed by Jerde partnership, many of whose employees had in fact previously worked on Disneyland, Disney World, and EuroDisney. They designed the interiors and the façade, as well as the outside attraction – in short, all the distinctive features of the resort. In this Post-fordist arrangement of expertise, the invariant structure of the building is designed by the resort corporation, whereas the production of the image is outsourced.

Designers carefully researched and executed the eighteenth-century pirate theme. Research showed that the image of pirates as it existed in the American imagination was mostly cinematic. Designers had to watch many pirate movies as a consequence. Treasure Island was conceived as a Portuguese outpost in the Caribbean, which had been taken over by the Spanish before it fell to the pirates. A full script was developed on how Treasure Island came to be on the Strip. In order to get into the story, designers literally lived the image of the pirate, especially when Wynn forced them to wear costumes. Moreover, like in Disneyland, all workers were called "cast members" who referred to another saying "aye". "Every time we had a decision, it's 'what would the pirate have done? ... We lived and breathed Pirate … We all talked about 'Yo ho ho' and said 'RRRR' a lot … And we stayed in costume,"[54] said Thomas.

Designers developed an eclectic parasitical pirate-style architecture. In order to "rationalize a lot of Middle-Eastern attitude and Moroccan influence,"[55] said Charles

White, one the artists involved by Jerde, they conceived of Treasure Island as a Portuguese outpost in the Caribbean taken over by the Spanish before it fell to the pirates. The difficulty in designing a resort that supposedly was built by pirates lay in the fact that pirates, rather than erecting new buildings, were known to take over buildings designed by others. According to the press release, “all public areas maintain the theme of a pirate village built of the booty and plunder the pirates have captured through the years.” For instance, a balcony was fashioned from the stern of ships, chandeliers were made out of skulls and bones, and ceilings were decked out with open pirate chests containing gold. Original objects of the period were incorporated into the resort, including 300-year-old doors, windows, stair railings, and huge bellows and blacksmith’s tools. Walls were decorated to appear old and worn. Finally, a scale game was played in the façade. Four sets of windows had been combined into a single visual element of a shutters and balcony window décor, humanizing the gigantic scale of the building that could potentially dispel the theme.

Like Mirage’s volcano, Treasure Island had an outside spectacle of similar, if not bigger, magnitude: “The Battle of Buccaneer Bay”. Wynn wanted to outdo Disney this time. “There are going to be things for the family and for young adults inside this place that people haven’t seen before – not even at Disney,” stated the press release. The show simulated a sea battle between two 90-foot ships, the *Hispaniola* versus the British frigate the *Royal Brittania* (the ship was originally called after the English sea captain and slave trader Sir Francis Drake, until the Black Cultural Awareness Society protested, causing Wynn to change the name into the Brittania). The ships could have come straight from a theme park. “These are not toys in Disneyland – these are complete, $10 million ships,” Wynn said. “People's appetites get bigger. It takes more for people to go 'Wow.'”[56] Of course, the signing and fighting pirates brought the 75,000 pounds Britannia – under the drama of fireworks – to sink. “After all, this is Las Vegas – the pirates always win,” stated the press release. [See Image 14]

The spectacular show – free for everyone to see – would draw many crowds, as well as bring vehicular traffic on the Strip to a virtual standstill. Many complained about traffic caused by the show. “Someone else will have to worry about the traffic,” [57] Wynn said, placing the burden on the county commissioners. By then, he had already won a major battle on when he got the 50-foot county setback rule diminished to 24 feet by lenient county commissioners, in order to accommodate his extravagant outside spectacle. At the same time, county officials adjusted zoning regulations to accommodate the attraction. The Hispaniola was classified as a sign, and the Britannia as an “amusement transportation vehicle”, a new special designation inserted in Clark County planning code.[58] Indeed, pirates do always win in Las Vegas.

Like the volcano, the pirate show was meant to draw people into the resort, replacing the roadside sign. Although the resort still had a sign, a giant skull and bones, in the pedestrian age of the Strip the theme park like attraction seemed more effective. "It will take a lot to stay in competition if all you have is casino, rooms and food—and don't have a theme park,"[59] said Alan Feldman, spokesperson of Mirage Resorts. Moreover, if previous resorts had an elevation fronting the Strip, Treasure Island had false front buildings and fake sea cliffs, much like a theme park attraction, designed by a company

specialized in the production and manufacturing of three-dimensional themed environments, Scenic Technologies. [See Image 15] “The name of the game is the walk-in business,” said Wynn. “You’ve got to have something exciting enough to make them want to come inside and look around. Once they’re inside, the casino takes care of itself. You have to separate the economic engine from the hook.”[60]After the pirate show finishes, crowds were “hooked”, as they were automatically led inside the resort, where further attractions, such as the 18,000-foot arcade Mutiny Bay, attempted to keep them there.

Although Buccaneer was the most Disney-like attraction built during the third building boom, perfectly executed according to the rules of Imagineering, the context of the Las Vegas Strip warped the attraction with a different purpose. Rather than one single operator able to control everything, multiple entrepreneurs, each controlling only part of the Strip, compete for visitors. Unlike Disneyland, theme-park-like attractions on the Strip are not built for their own sake, but rather function as symbolic weaponry, aimed at reeling people into the casino after the show. Like theme park dynamics in Disneyland, people on the Strip naturally congregate in front of each attraction, with the difference that, after the show, most of them are steered into the casino. And whereas the people movers in Disney are employed to control crowds and manage traffic for the park as a whole, in Las Vegas developers use people movers against each other as weapons of mass traffic.

At the same time, Disneyland, unlike Las Vegas, is better able to restructure itself. The Las Vegas Strip is public, and does not have the same mechanisms of control like Disney. Inside the casino, things are different. Since they are private, they are highly controlled and regulated spaces, much like Disneyland. So at the heart of the differences between the Las Vegas Strip and Disneyland lies that Disneyland is a monopolistic environment, whereas there are multiple competing ‘Disneylands” on the Las Vegas Strip.

This is one of the reasons why the resorts attempted to privatize as much public space of the Las Vegas Strip. It allowed them to regulate bodies in space: to manage crowds, and to keep out smut peddlers and demonstrations. As the Strip became a more pedestrian environment, resorts and the American Civil Liberties Union increasingly wagered battles over the sidewalks of the Las Vegas Strip. At the same time resorts tried to privatize public space, they made private space “public”. Although the theme park attractions of the resorts are located on private property, they appear to be part of the public domain. Moreover, they are publicly used. Most people prefer to walk on the large wooden private walkway of Treasure Island, as opposed to the small strip of public sidewalk that lies next to it. Resorts give their private space back to the public, and make it appear as public, in order to lure people into the resorts. On the grounds of private space, they have more control, and are less limited by planning commissions. By blurring the domains of the public with the private, resorts took advantage of the territorial uncertainty. Quite literally, Treasure Island pirates invaded the Lass Vegas Strip, but on their grounds.

Treasure Island opened on Dunes Day, D-Day, when Wynn fired the cannons of the Brittania on the Dunes. Wynn wanted the property he had bought decimated, so he could

build a new resort. As Schwartz' modernist Diamond of the Dunes and the Federal Signs' onionized spade turned into ashes – the sign spelled "No Vacancy" for the occasion – a new paradigm rose in its place. [See Image 16] "My hero was Disney," Wynn said to a reporter the day of the opening of Treasure Island. "I would be just as happy building theme parks as casinos, but it's been done already."[61] Junk bond King Michael Milken concurred: "I met Steve in 1978 and felt that Steve embodied Walt Disney. I think we're seeing some of that embodiment tonight."[62] D-Day marked the moment in which the Dunes gave way to Disney.

It was an unprecedented spectacle of demolition. For the first time, a demolition and fireworks-company joined forces to create the implosion. At Wynn's request, the pyrotechnics cost three times more than those done in *Lethal Weapon III*.[63] The event disrupted the city. In a "Dunes Day" special edition, the *Las Vegas Sun* tutored locals on how to observe or navigate around the spectacle. [See Image 17] Immediately after the explosion, which got a standing ovation from the public, Mirage stock rose 1 point to 56.5 per share.[64] "Fall of Dunes much greater than its rise," headlined the *Las Vegas Sun* the following day.

Above all, the implosion was an event made for television. The publicity stunt was reported extensively in the national news media and featured live on television. Three hundred and seventy-two media outlets from around the world eagerly anticipated the implosion. It gave millions of dollars worth of free publicity. In addition, Wynn produced an hour-long infomercial, called "Treasure Island: The Adventure Begins" which aired on NBC. The infomercial was written by Jim Hart, screenplay writer of *Hook*, and directed by a veteran Disney promotional TV specials. The implosion was Imagineered as a hunt for a treasure buried underneath the Dunes. Yet, the real treasure was that with the Disneyfication of the Strip, so the stigma attached to gaming had finally been removed. This opened up the gaming industry up to corporate partnerships. A Coca Cola sponsorship paid for the airtime of the infomercial. "Coke is going to sponsor a show about the opening of a casino hotel," said Wynn. "If that's not a sign of the changing of the times, what is?"[65]

Another sign of the changing times was that Treasure Island was the first resort to offer a permanent home to the critically acclaimed Cirque de Soleil show. Part of Cirque's success lay in its universal appeal to people of all ages and nationalities. The French Canadian circus company had reinvented the circus by relying solely on acrobatics, music, and theatre, without animals. On the rare occasion the performers spoke, they used a non-existing language, removing the language barrier for foreign visitors. Wynn had already introduced the company to the Strip in 1992 at the Mirage. But while they still performed in a big top at the Mirage, at Treasure Island the company received a permanent $26 million theatre. [See Image 18] Soon, the acrobats would call Las Vegas its major base, performing in many other resorts on the Strip. After Las Vegas had been an end-stop for fading stars for almost two decades, Cirque de Soleil offered to lend its reputation to the Strip.

While some thought that the implosion of the Dunes was the best thing that ever happened to the property, not everyone was equally happy about the fact that the Dunes

sign as well as the Diamond of the Dunes were razed to the ground. [See Image 19] The Dunes sign, which glowed red in such relentless fury, celebrated by the likes of Wolfe and Venturi, was one of the "divining rods of popular culture", and one of the last relics of the Pop City age. It was victim of a trend in which new electronic full-color video signs, able to constantly change their message, gradually phased out neon signage. Some locals took offense at the arrogance by which the Dunes sign was decimated, expressing nostalgia for the previous phase of the Strip:

> "Was the 'No vacancy' on the sign really necessary? It was as if the Treasure Island needed to destroy something that had, even at this low point, a dignity, class and prestige that Treasure Island will never attain. This left a sour taste in my mouth, and all the people I have talked to agree. We look toward the future but miss the past. The town was safe, the casinos were glamorous. The Thunderbird was open. The Tropicana had a beautiful fountain and Sinbad the Sultan stood high."[66]

The demolition sparked a debate on preservation of popular culture in Las Vegas; one of the main advocates was Alan Hess. Other architectural preservation disputes were the Oregon wing of the Flamingo, scheduled to be imploded, and the replacement of the eccentric Stardust font on the Stardust façade for corporate Helvetica in 1991. *The New York Times* covered the debate in an article with the headline "In *the* city of change, is Las Vegas Landmark an oxymoron?" Indeed, preservation never played a role on the Las Vegas Strip. The ultra-capitalist space had led itself by profit rather than sentiment. The Strip had replaced old regimes of signs for new ones quickly and violently – their obliteration turned into an act of celebration. Effectively, the implosion if the Dunes was used as gimmick that turned crowds away from competing venues, into the Treasure Island – like a free attraction ride with bonus fireworks.

4.1.7 The Grand Salvo

The final salvo came from MGM Grand. The new MGM Grand, the last resort built in 1993, borrowed images as well as corporate practices from Disney. The resort introduced corporate sponsorships, automated teller machines, and a post-Fordist operational model based on leasing out the entertainment, retail and restaurant spaces. In addition, it built the biggest resort so far that attempted to co-opt all of the competition's new symbolic weaponry by appropriating their theme, and opening a complete theme park. With the MGM Grand, the first wave of resort construction had come to an end. During the aftermath of the theme wars, Las Vegas had succeeded in becoming the quintessential American vacation destination. It was now perceived as Las Vegas USA.

Kirk Kerkorian, 75% owner of the publicly traded MGM Grand, Inc., had been less active on the Strip ever since he sold his old MGM Grand (1973) to Bally Entertainment Corporation in 1985. However, the new excitement generated on the Strip caused Kerkorian to get back into the action. Once again, Kerkorian decided to build a resort that was huge, and to call it MGM Grand. The old MGM had been renamed Bally's, with a new porte-cochere that connected to the Strip with a people mover in 1993. [See Image 20] The upgrade illustrated how the Strip had evolved into a more pedestrian place:

where previously parking lots were situated, now devices reeled in pedestrians, and where YESCO had designed the neon roadside sign, now it had designed the lighted pillars lining the people mover.

It required a complex financial construction to fund the $1 billion resort. The new MGM Grand was financed by 45% equity, 43.2% first mortgage notes, 6% bank loans, and 5% leases. Even though half of the project was paid for without any interest because of the high equity ratio (equity finance is obtained through selling ordinary shares to investors), Kerkorian still had to pay 2% more interest than Wynn's Treasure Island,[67] since Wynn was a more trusted name on Wall Street.

The new MGM Grand was precisely that: grand – as in huge. Kerkorian needed an extraordinarily large lot for the resort. He managed to piece together an impressive 112-acre site on the Strip by buying the land of the Marina Hotel, as well as the Tropicana golf course behind it. Architect Veldon Simpson designed 33-story towers in an X-shape, containing 5,005 rooms: a new Strip and world record. [See Image 21] Gaming industry analysts considered the resort about two thousand rooms too large, questioning whether a high level of service could be maintained with so many rooms. MGM Grand, on the contrary, boasted its bigness, by mentioning that it had a valet area wider than the San Diego freeway and an employee population that would rank the MGM Grand as the ninth largest city in Nevada. The resort's showroom, the MGM Grand Garden, was unprecedented in size as well. The 15,200-seat special events arena for concerts, exhibitions, and sports events such as boxing and tennis, was even bigger than Madison Square Garden. It physically illustrated how entertainment played a more significant role on the Strip. [See Image 22]

Like his competition, Kerkorian rode the Disney wave, going after the demographic of tourists that do not travel without their children. Larry Woolf, president of MGM Grand, developed his own ingenuous acronym for the new lucrative entity: "We're expecting to capture what I call the ADDICTS - Adrenalin Driven Dual Income Couples That feel guilty about keeping their kids at home."[68] Different from Kerkorian's previous properties, the International and the old MGM Grand, his new MGM Grand was deliberately themed, and he even included a theme park.

The resort fit in the type that evoked a fantasy place, and it was themed after the "Emerald City" from the *Wizard of Oz*. The emerald-colored exterior façade, a robotic Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tin Man and Cowardly Lion, as well as a 75-foot high, $13 million Emerald City, accessed by a yellow brick road, attested to the theme. "Finally, we can all go over the rainbow," stated the press release. Even the MGM Grand's 8,000 new "cast members" were to go to the "University of Oz," a forum for their acculturation, where, upon completion, they receive their Th. D – a Doctor of Thinkology (the award that the Wizard of Oz awarded to Scarecrow in the movie). To top things off, an 88-foot-tall MGM Grand Lion's head functioned as the entrance of the resort. Now, the Strip featured two gigantic feline creatures on opposite sides – a Sphinx and a Lion – out-staring another with penetrating eyes. [See Image 23]

However, since MGM was so grand, the casino was severed into four different themes, including Emerald City, Monte Carlo, Hollywood, and Sports casino. It showed a major difference between Disneyland and the Strip. The size and nature of the core industry of the Strip – gambling – was not conducive to nourishing high quality themed environments. As Anderton and Chase noted in *Las Vegas, the Success of Excess*, published in 1997*:* "Theming is still in its infancy in Las Vegas and the quality is uneven – Only at Buccaneer Bay does it so far meet the standards of the Disney or Universal theme parks. Hotel/casinos frequently jumble multiple conflicting themes, or stop and start themes areas without thinking about the edges or juxtapositions." [69]The requirements of gaming in Las Vegas always superseded Disney's rules of Imagineering. Whereas theme designers like to eliminate everything that potentially could be incongruent with the theme, so as not to disrupt the illusion and mood, casino spaces are a difficult animal to theme because most gamblers prefer not to be distracted. This is one of the reasons why resorts tend to be incongruous in terms of themes.

The new MGM Grand prided itself in having a $110 million theme park; thus it called itself *MGM Grand Hotel and Theme Park*. The 33-acre theme park was about as big as Disneyland when it opened in 1955. "Although there are other properties in Las Vegas that have themes, this is a full-fledged theme park," [70] bragged the MGM spokesperson. Architect Veldon Simpson, who also designed Luxor and Grand Slam Canyon, designed the theme park to resemble the back lot of a Hollywood movie studio, divided into nine different themes areas, including a New York street and skyline, which would resurface in a full blown resort only a few years later. Ironically, the theme park could not represent actual MGM movies, since MGM had previously sold the copyrights of their movies for theme parks to Disney. So instead of mining themes from their own movies, the theme park co-opted some of the themes used by MGM's competitors: it had a Grand Canyon ride which resembled Circus' Grand Slam Canyon, in addition to a 20-minute Dueling Pirates stunt show, which was reminiscent of Treasure Island's Battle of Buccaneer Bay. Critics, however, wondered whether it was a good idea to incorporate an actual theme park, since time spent at the theme park could take away from time at the casino. [See Image 24]

From an operational point of view, the MGM Grand was very different. MGM Grand would just operate the casino and hotel, leasing out the retail, dining, and entertainment spaces. The resort subcontracted all of their restaurants to existing brands, when it turned out it could not operate its restaurants with a profit. Moreover, the MGM Grand "four walled" its showroom, the MGM Grand Garden. It leased the arena to a promoter of an event, eliminating the risk on part of the hotel. The new operational model set a trend other resorts would follow; outside operators that specialized in dining entertainment were increasingly brought in.

The new MGM Grand was also the first resort to rely on corporate sponsorships. MGM Grand strategically marketed with major U.S. corporations such as Dollar Rent a Car, Coca Cola, Chrysler, and Kodak, whose logos as well as their products appear at MGM Grand. Up to 12 companies hung up their logo in the arena. MGM had gotten the idea from theme parks such as Disney and Six Flags, which also rely on sponsorships. Since

visitor volume at MGM Grand was so large – fluctuating between 50,000 to 60,000 daily visitors – corporations were eager to advertise. With the masses coming in, they were no longer shy to associate themselves with the gaming industry.

Thanks to a new technology, the Automated Teller Machine, MGM Grand's 3,500 slot machines were more easily fed. MGM Grand opened with 11 ATM's, at the time the largest concentration of ATM's in one facility. With the advent of the ATM, cash became much easier available to consumers. Before, casinos had to rate players and extend credit based on a ratings system. With the arrival of ATM's, casinos no longer needed to bear the risk of credit, while at the same time consumers could access capital more conveniently. The cash extracted from the ATM's would more easily make its way into the slot machines, revealing the blatant affinity between the two machines: one delivered capital, the other extracted it.

At the same time MGM Grand took advantage of these operational strategies, corporate sponsorships, and new technology, it attempted to limit the influence of the union. Initially, MGM Grand was set up as non-union, to the complaint of the Culinary Union who set up pickets. In order to compete for labor with other resorts and the union, the MGM Grand went as far as to plan a 9,500-square-foot health clinic that provided cheap health care to workers and their families. The union mounted a strike, which forced Kerkorian to settle. Finally, the Culinary Union successfully negotiated a collective bargaining agreement with MGM Grand in 1997. However, the struggle was emblematic of the gradual decrease of influence of the union on the Strip. As the Strip was being Disneyfied, so it took over Disney's corporate practices, as well as its attitudes towards organized labor.

Finally, in the aftermath of the theme wars, Las Vegas had transformed from gaming capital to a family destination on par with Disney world. In 1994, the city's hotel room count was 50,000, twice that of Manhattan, only a little less than Orlando. Most of these rooms were concentrated on a single intersection at Tropicana and the Strip, which now had gotten the designation of the "four corners," – a designation that previously belonged to the Flamingo intersection with the Strip, where Bally's, Caesars, Barbary Coast, and Hilton were situated. The advent of the new megaresorts came at the cost of others. They had moved the crowds towards the center and the south end of the Strip, where the theme wars unfolded. Properties on the north end suffered. Moreover, the megaresorts drew tourists away from the smaller properties. It was estimated that by 1994, only six properties (the Mirage, Treasure Island, Circus Circus, Excalibur, Luxor, and MGM Grand) generated 50% of revenue in Las Vegas.[71] And only three companies owned these six properties. Behind the architecture of themed difference on the Strip lurked an oligopoly.

As a result of the Disneyfication of the Strip, Las Vegas' image had been sanitized. Some industry analysts characterized the transition as "going from Sin City to Orlando with gambling."[72] In trying to tap into the market of families and baby-boomers, resorts deemphasized gambling by offering Disney-like attractions. Without a single reference to gaming, the LVCVA marketed the city as "A World of Excitement: In One Amazing

Place" in 1994. Despite the fact that Las Vegas was still very different from other parts of the United States – in that it had legalized gambling and a close proximity to legalized prostitution as well – architecture had effectively managed the difference between image and reality. Theme park attractions were in, and nude shows were out. The negative image of the city had been shed – Disney had given Las Vegas a G-rating.

The new family image sat uneasily with a town previously known as Sin City. Marc Cooper, in *Village Voice*, wrote that Las Vegas was being "swept away by a lava flow of respectability and family values. Anxiously gathered at the foot of the Mirage volcano was this herd of beefy middle Americans, almost all dressed in short pants, T-shirts and baseball caps, and enough of them wearing those pastel-colored fanny packs around their waists that the city looked as though it was immersed in a continuing convention of colostomy patients."[73] [See Image 25] He blamed the Disneylike attractions as complicit in the production of a false consciousness that obfuscates class. "But most of all Wynn, more than any other corporate power in Las Vegas, has understood the gestalt of entertainment and diversion in modern America. Give 'em spectacle, spectacle, and then a little more spectacle. Age, class, educational differences wither under the wow 'em neon and the knockout theatrics," [74] wrote Cooper.

The family stereotype of the new Las Vegas was portrayed and criticized in Hollywood as well. "Today, it looks like Disneyland. And while the kids play cardboard pirates, Mommy and Daddy drop the house payments and Junior's college money on the poker slots," lamented Ace Rothstein, played by Robert De Niro in *Casino* (1995). Rothstein's criticism was even used as the main plot of the film *Vegas Vacation* (1997). It made it apparent that while the Strip had established itself as the quintessential American vacation experience, there were some serious symbolic incongruities between the family image and that of gambling. Las Vegas USA was a place where middle-class American parents irresponsibly wasted their family budget, exposing their offspring to the unsavory practice of gambling. [See Image 26]

Behind the criticism lay nostalgia for the past days of the Strip. This sentiment was vented boldly by Alec Baldwin as Shelly Kaplow in *The Cooler* (2003):

> "What? You mean that Disneyland mookfest out there? Huh? Come on, you know what that is? Huh? That's a fucking violation is what that is. Something that used to be beautiful, used to have class, like a gorgeous high-priced hooker with an exclusive clientele. Then along comes that Steve Wynn cocksucker and knocks her up and puts her in a fucking family way. Now she's nothing but a cheap, fat whore hiding behind too much fucking make-up. I look at her and see all her fucking stretch marks, it makes me want to cry - because I remember the way she used to be."

Despite the criticism, in 1994, Kurt Anderson placed Las Vegas on the cover of *Times Magazine* as the new "All-American City". [See Image 27] In the article, "Las Vegas U.S.A.", he claimed that "the place is no longer considered racy or naughty by most people … The general Las Vegas marketing spin today is that the city is fun for the whole family. It seems to be an effective P.R. line, but it's an idea that the owners of the

new Luxor and MGM Grand may have taken too much to heart." Anderson argued not only that Las Vegas had become mainstream, but that its themed architecture had influenced the rest of America. Las Vegas was no longer edgy – it had gone from pop to mainstream – because the trend of postmodernism in architecture, first observed by Wolfe and Venturi on the Strip, was gaining speed in the rest of America.

> "Today almost every big-city downtown has new skyscrapers that endeavor to look like old skyscrapers. Almost every suburb has a shopping center decorated with phony arches, phony pediments, phony columns. Two decades after Venturi proposed, with the intellectual's standard perverse quasi-affection, that Vegas could be a beacon for the nation's architecture, his manifesto had transformed America. Forget the Bauhaus and your house -- it is the Vegas aesthetic, architecture as grandiose cartoon, that has become the American Establishment style. And so the splendidly pyramidal new Luxor and cubist new MGM Grand (both the work of local architect Veldon Simpson) do not seem so weird, since equally odd buildings now exist all over the place."[75]

If previously Las Vegas had been the United States' "Other", it now was the producer of mainstream America. Las Vegas had become the center point of transformation of American culture. For theorists and writers that were trying to get a measure of the American cultural climate, the city would be used almost like a barometer, a lens through which to investigate America. "There is a Jorge Luis Borges story called The Aleph that describes the magical point where all places are seen from every angle. Las Vegas has become that place in America, less because of its own transformation in the past decade than because of the transformation of the nation. Las Vegas has become Americanized, and, even more, America has become Las Vegasized,"[76] claimed Anderson.

Moreover, after the onslaught of the architectural icons of the 1960s and 70s, replaced one by one by Disney-like megaresorts, the architecture of the Strip looked completely different. Those who had celebrated the previous era of the Strip lamented the metamorphosis. "When we were interested in Las Vegas twenty-five years ago, when it represented iconographic sprawl, our interest was clearly daring. This is hard to believe today because Las Vegas had become scenographic like Disneyland,"[77] said Scott Brown and Venturi. In the essay "Las Vegas after Its Classic Age", they reconceptualized the Strip. The architecture, they claimed, had shifted from "decorated shed" to "duck". Like a building the shape of a duck, the architecture of the new resorts was subordinated to an overall symbolic form, such as an Eqyptian pyramid. Although their duck might classify the new resorts of Las Vegas — a mouse would be a better animal to use as a metaphor would be the mouse: Mickey Mouse.

It was ironic that Venturi and Scott Brown no longer thought the Las Vegas Strip was daring. The Disney-like architecture of the Strip was as much part of pop culture as the eccentric neon signage the Yale professors had theorized. Like YESCO sign designers and Jay Sarno had mined forms and themes from popular culture and so had corporations. "Las Vegas exists because it is a perfect reflection of America," had said Steve Wynn to *Time Magazine.* "It represents all the things people in every city in America like. Here they can get it in one gulp."

At the same time, Las Vegas for architects was still a daring topic, not respected by serious architects and urban designers. Even the “New Urbanists”, an American urban design movement, who are part of the same school that see Disneyland as the new urban solution,[78] critiqued Las Vegas. With their towns Celebration and Seaside, which like Disney’s Main Street harkened back to an idealized 1950s version of small town America suburbia, this was surprising. For instance, Kunstler, one of their chief representatives, in a chapter called *Utopia of Clowns*, published in his book *Geography of Nowhere*, delivered a sneering critique not only on the Strip, but also on those that had glorified it. “They say that Antarctica is the worst place on earth, but I believe that distinction belongs to Las Vegas, hands down...,” he wrote. Of Venturi’s *Learning from Las Vegas*, Kunstler wrote:

> "Parking lots were fascinating, the vast spaces between the buildings were fascinating, the luridly painted statues ringing Caesar's Palace, the highway, the curbing, even the "zone of rusting beer cans" at the ragged edge of town had something to reward the patient observer. As for the bad urbanism of the strip, the complete lack of relationship between buildings, the obliteration of human scale, the tyranny of the car – no problem. "We might not like cars, but a large part of the population does," Venturi has written earlier. It was a "taste culture" issues. They were like stoned graduate students on a field trip, their critical faculties gone up in smoke."[79]

Ironically, Venturi’s work had set the grounds for the New Urbanists, by taking an appreciation in the anachronistic, popular, and vernacular architecture. Somehow, Venturi had opened up a space in modernist architecture for the New Urbanists’ universal application of their anachronistic small town America formula. Yet, neither Kunstler nor Venturi respected the new Strip, because they were essentially still modernist writers. Venturi was nostalgic for a period long gone on the Strip that he had used as a source of inspiration, while Kunstler had never seen the Strip as a real place anyway. Instead, he named it a “geography of nowhere”, a non-place. As such, he belongs in a tradition of modernist conservative writers on placelessness, such as Relph’s *Place and Placelessness* (1976) and Marc Augé’s *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995). Relph, a precursor to Augé and Kunstler, linked place to authenticity. Relph argued that in our modern era, an authentic sense of place is slowly changing into an inauthentic attitude called *placelessness*: "the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place.” According to Relph, placelessness comes from *kitsch* (an uncritical acceptance of mass values) or *technique* (the overriding concern with efficiency as an end in itself). However, rather than a radical historical break, their conception of the non-place, was rooted in nostalgia and an increasing self-consciousness towards the invention of place. Yet, in the context of Strip, Disney was simply another theme applied to place, part of a tradition of themes set by Rancho, Frontier, Flamingo, and Caesars Palace; perhaps, Disney was as authentic to the Strip as possible.

Regardless, the only way the Strip had evaluated itself was in its commercial success, not in terms of its authenticity. And successful it was. The Strip's Disneyfication had succeeded in reeling in a new mass market of consumers. Executives assumed that behind the growth laid the themed megaresorts. The vice president of Circus Circus, Glenn Schaeffer, who had graduated from the prestigious Iowa Writers Workshop, praised the architecture of the "entertainment megastore" in his keynote speech at the 1997 Annual International Gaming and Business Expo. His opening words were: "I would like to reflect on the new architecture of the Las Vegas Strip. It has established Las Vegas as the leading gainer of market share in what is arguably the world's biggest market – mass tourism."[80] Architecture was considered solely responsible in making the crowd. "Our thesis, which has been 'If you build them, they will come,' is not a spent idea – it's a true axiom. We're going to build them so that the customers have to come see them … Billion-dollar buildings in Las Vegas, like the gravity of dense objects, will attract the biggest crowds for the longest stay.[81] These buildings, he claimed, needed to attract attention. "In Las Vegas, we promote the site and the sounds and the spectacle that you can't quite find back home or anywhere else. We call these our production values. Our buildings command a special kind of attention." [82] Schaeffer even claimed how this new architecture rivaled with the great architectural monuments of history, boasting how Luxor has more visitors annually than not only the Sphinx of Giza, but all of Egypt, by at least a factor three. It was obvious casino executives had no message to theorists' "hyperreal" objections.

And while some lamented its recent transformation, the Strip was already evolving into something else. As quickly as the Strip turned into a middle-class family destination on par with Disney, it would unravel itself – into something it speculated would be much more profitable. As the Strip reached the pinnacle of Disney, Disney was already on retreat.

4.2 Sim City

The second phase of the third building boom is best described as Sim City, for both architectural and economic reasons. Whereas in the first phase resorts represented the fantasy themes most commonly associated with Disney, the new dominant resort type was one that replicated other places. But rather than being exact replicas, resorts are idealized versions of real places, which at some point no longer refer to the original. Economically, junk bonds and high-risk loans mimic the post-structural interpretation of the sign, as they are loans that at one point cease to reference to the real risks, laying the grounds for the crisis that ended the next building boom. A few decades after Baudrillard had theorized the Strip as a hyperreality, post-structuralism could never have been more applied to the Strip, as investment structures, as well as the Strip's architecture, get lost in representation and become self-referential.

The Sim City era was an explicit reaction to Disney. After the Strip had so quickly been Disneyfied, there was a backlash. Although the new focus on middle-class tourists and families did increase visitor volume, plus a broadened visitor base, the new visitors spent less. As of 1996, Las Vegas was the leading tourist destination in the United States, ahead of Orlando, yet gaming revenues remained nearly the same. As a result, many properties

rejected the family message and posited themselves as adults only. Yet, the extreme theming paradigm persisted; rather than taking fantasy as a theme, urbanity was taken as theme. Specifically, a type of urbanity was produced that evoked the wealthier and more cultured tourist destinations. Like before, the new resorts devalued the old ones: Sim City demoted Disneyland to a cheap and childish theme park.

The new resort had taken postmodernism a step further. The new resorts did not simply cite historic buildings or exotic places, with here and there a phony column as a touch of irony; they were exact replicas, sometimes literally one-to-one copies. Even though this was architecture based on the replica, rather than on fantasy, in a way it was still Disney. The dominant type of resorts in the last half of the third building boom are more similar to the country pavilions in Disney's Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT)'s World Showcase, or like Disney's Main Street, which are both replicas of actual places. The new resorts had learned another lesson from Disney World; Disney was one of the first to commercialize a permanent version of a world exhibition. However, even though the new resorts seemed to refer to real places, they were not actual replicas; they were simulations that commodified nostalgia, representing idealized notions of places congealed in a particular time. The new resorts on the Las Vegas Strip decontextualized and dehistoricized the world's global icons for commercial purposes, not for their authenticity.

Global capitalism, and the American suburban flight away from cities, partly explains the phenomenon of resorts mining from other places, and particularly cities. In the global competition for tourists, according to AlSayyad, a trend in the built environment is the "manufacturing of heritage". Buildings pillage from a historical past and, particularly, those places with historical and cultural significance, in order to enable the tourist "consumption of tradition". AlSayyad sees global capitalism as one of the causes. "Amidst the monotony of global high capitalism, at a time when standardized products and services are increasingly marketed worldwide, there is an increasing demand for built environments that promise unique cultural experience."[83] Gottdiener explains that the surfacing of city themes in particular. He sees the demand for urbanity as the result of the decline of historical city centers in the United States. "With advancing suburbanization, as central city districts themselves die, they are recycled as images and themes for Las Vegas casinos and large suburban shopping malls, as we have seen… The city itself had become a theme,"[84] he claimed. However, even though the suburban flight had led people to desire a city, the themed resorts were not actual cities, but sanitized versions, that substituted for the messiness of the real city. In addition to the above, it must be noted that the new resorts particularly referenced those urban environments were that exuded luxury and cultural sophistication, as a way to attract a specific clientele.

In order to organize the reproduction of built environments, corporations had to re-arrange expertise. Multiple specialized companies, traditionally unfamiliar to the resort industry, had to be organized. Typically, central in all relations of productions stood a single reified image. This image expressed the main concept, and almost functioned as a contract among the different parties. Buildings were required to be instantly recognizable an easily identifiable image. "The buildings on the Las Vegas Strip are a sign. If you have

to put up a sign, you haven't done it right," [85] said Schaeffer. The model for the resort was Venturi's "duck", the building as sign. Typically, an artist, not an architect, would draw this image, based on research and photos taken from the place evoked. Theme designers narrowed the focus of the project through a temporal bracket of a certain place; say Manhattan of the early 20th century, Paris of the nineteenth century, or Venice of the 16th century. The artist rendering was finally laid over an invariant structure of the resort, which is the efficiency model of corporate profit. Finally, companies that specialize on the fabrication of the image, the three dimensional themed spaces, were contracted, but they were different than in the Disney Corporation, where designers, architects and engineers, and clients all working for the same company. In contrast, so notes O' Brien, in Las Vegas the "extreme segregation of the roles of designer, architect, builder, and engineer more accurately reflects a distributed expertise mode of production, prevalent in many large-scale capitalist undertakings today."[86] This makes it difficult to control cost and manage expertise, and claims O' Brien, the reason that the Las Vegas themed resorts are less skillfully executed than Disney. Moreover, a major difference is that the success of resorts is measured by profitability, in contrast to physical "seamlessness", the evaluating measure for themed environments.

The techniques that corporations develop that reproduce other places, led to a situation in which there was a weird symbolic tension between the copy and the original. This caused architectural theorist once again to take an interest in Las Vegas. But unlike the glorification of the landscape of signs of the Pop City era, the new Disney-like Strip was despised as a hyperreal bastion of fake copies. Already before the Disney era, the Strip had been analyzed as a hyperreality, but it was mainly in reference to the advertising billboards; when resorts incorporated exact replicas of other places, the diagnosis appeared more fitting. And so the city was theorized as a quintessential hyperreality, a city of simulacra and nothingness, a city as a theme park with a radical loss of public life, a cartoon caricature of a city.

Both Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard had already referred to Las Vegas as a hyperreality. But they analyzed the Las Vegas of the late 1970s, and they mainly referred to the landscape of advertising and billboards. In a way, they theorized Las Vegas as a hyperrealilty long before the city had actually reached its hyperreal climax. If Eco would have visited the city in the nineties as opposed to the seventies, he probably would not have skipped it, in search as he was of the absolute fake city. Unlike Las Vegas, he claimed, Disneyland was as a real example of an absolutely fake city. Western cities he deemed more interesting also, not the authentic ones, but the ones "born from nothing, out of pure imitative determination. They are 'the real thing.'"[87] Eco mistimed his visit to the hyperreal Strip; he was too late for the Last Frontier Village and too early for the Venetian.

However, as the Strip lined up with copies of other places – including a fake Sphinx, Eiffel Tower, New York skyline, and Venetian canals – the hyperreal assessment seemed more fitting to architectural and urban theorists. Eco and Baudrillard provided the theoretical underpinnings of those studying the new Las Vegas Strip. The resorts themselves, rather than the signs, became the new billboards. Like the signs, the resorts are simulacra: copies that at one point cease to refer to an original and substitute for the

authentic. [See Image 52] As a result, Las Vegas was theorized as a fake city defined by a synthetic experience. No longer was the commercial vernacular architecture of Las Vegas seen as an inspiration. Instead, the Strip was interpreted as a void, a nothingness of self-referential signifiers detached from the real, a center without origin, a hyperreal bastion of the fake.

Photographer Barbieri, for whom Las Vegas is "the city as an avatar of itself", best captured this new hyperreal stage of Las Vegas. Barbieri's photographs were shot from a helicopter with a tilt-shift lens, which blurs out parts of the image, erasing details and imperfections. As a result, his lens made the city's simulated monuments look even more artificial; they appear as scale models, uncannily unreal. [See Image 28] Las Vegas appears as a fake city.

Theorists use Las Vegas as a city to debate about the nature of authenticity. Las Vegas, claim theorists, is unauthentic. The argument was that the hyperreality of the Strip also simulated experience, creating a passive subject, isolated in a cloud of false consciousness. The most sneering critique of Las Vegas came from Bruce Bégout, another French philosopher, who wrote an entire book on the city, called *Zeropolis*. Bégout called Las Vegas a "city of nothing", characterized by an "urbanity of nothingness":[88]

> "Las Vegas marks itself out by nothingness. All the negative descriptions that can generally be used in labeling a city apply to it, for its absence of consistency actually makes its existence doubtful: no man's land, waste ground, non-place, ghost town, urban simulacrum, nowhere city, etc. For us it is Zeropolis, the non-city which is the very first city, just as zero is the very first number. The nothing that counts, the nothingness of neon."

At the heart of this urbanity of nothingness, according to Bégout, lay excessive capitalism. "For the first time excess turns into lack, and the capital of exaggeration lets incidences of total deficiency show through: cultural, social and aesthetic poverty." Mimicking arguments of Baudrillard, it was partly a media critique as well. **"**As thick as the giant advertising billboards that ubiquitously package it, loading it with naïve and comic symbols, crude, schematic messages, Las Vegas is a city of literal superficiality." Television, like advertising, was another reason for a city like Las Vegas: "the structure of this city is a lot like television."

Critics even considered the Las Vegas as the new center of the United States, leading the nation in the transformation of all aspects of society into an empty spectacle. For instance, Bégout used Las Vegas as a prism to critique consumerist culture in society as a whole:

> "… Las Vegas is nothing more than our everyday cityscape. … No matter where we live: Paris, Cape Town, Tokyo, São Paulo or Moscow, the culture of consumerism and recreation that has transfigures Las Vegas for nearly thirty years daily gains more ground in our everyday relation to the city. We are all

> inhabitants of Las Vegas, however far we are from southern Nevada. Its name is no longer a fantasy. It lives in our heads, is expressed in our ordinary gestures."[89]

Similarly, four years after Baudrillard first wrote about Las Vegas, Neil Postman, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), declared Las Vegas the "symbolic capital" of the United States:

> "Today, we must look to the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, as a metaphor of our national character and aspiration, its symbol a thirty-foot-high cardboard picture of a slot machine and a chorus girl. For Las Vegas is a city entirely devoted to the idea of entertainment, and as such proclaims the spirit of a culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment. Our politics, our religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice."

The cover of Postman's book featured an image of Ronald Reagan, the actor-turned-president. In what is perhaps a peculiar coincidence, Reagan had a history with Las Vegas. In 1955, he had a brief stint on the stage of the New Frontier, when he hosted a show with trained chimpanzees. Anyway, Postman considered Las Vegas as a city defined by entertainment, a symptom of a society dictated by the television. Such a society only nourished shallow and superficial subjects, obsessed with image.

> "As typography once dictated the style of conducting politics, religion, business, education, law and other important social matters, television now takes command. In courtrooms, classrooms, operating rooms, board rooms, churches and even airplanes, Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas; they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials. For the message of television as metaphor is not only that all the world is a stage but that the stage is located in Las Vegas, Nevada."[90]

The critics that saw spectacle prevail in American society, above all, located the epicentre of the phenomenon on the Las Vegas Strip. The simulated monuments on the Strip, they claimed, turned people into passive subjects. According to Radke, "the hyperreal world of the Las Vegas strip renders the potentially volatile and dangerous subject immobile, sterile, predictable, and inert."[91] Of course, the question was how these writers managed to make such critical observations while avoiding the spell of the spectacle they had theorized.

With all the criticism of Las Vegas, it was a long time since Las Vegas was heralded as a Pop city. Whereas the simulation on the Las Vegas Strip appalled the Las Vegas hyperrealists, Venturi had once appreciated it as a positive and playful aspect of architecture:

> "For the architect or urban designer, comparisons of Las Vegas with others of the world's "pleasure zones"—with Marienbad, the Alhambra, Xanadu, and Disneyland, for instance, essential to the imagery of pleasure-zone architecture are

> lightness, the quality of being an oasis in a perhaps hostile context, heightened symbolism, and the ability to engulf the visitor in a new role: for three days one may imagine oneself a centurion at Caesar's palace, a ranger at the Frontier, or a jetsetter at the Riviera rather than a salesperson from Des Moines, Iowa … The Strip shows the value of symbolism and allusion in an architecture of vast space and speed and proves that people, even architects, have fun with architecture that reminds them of something else, perhaps of harems of the Wild West in Las Vegas."[92]

But even Venturi did not appreciate the Disney-phase of the Strip. When the Strip had finally really gone mainstream and was more popular than ever, the architectural establishment no longer saw any value in it, other than an object of critical interpretation, a tool to critique American society as a whole. This is strange, because to some extent, during the third building boom, once again the Strip becomes a pinnacle of architectural eccentricity, the center of innovation of Disney-like structures, where an Eiffel tower stood outside and inside a Paris Opera House, a New York skyline was constructed out of a single structure, and Venetian canals hovered above a casino. Rather than dismissing the Strip as a hyperreality, architects could have shocked the cultural establishment by once again learning from Las Vegas.

4.2.1 Adults Only Theme Park

When it turned out that families did not bring in as much money as other demographics, during the mid-1990s, most properties rejected their family image, while the second wave of new resort construction – the Stratosphere, Monte Carlo, and New York New York – deemphasized families. It marked the beginning of a process of de-Disneyfication. Although the Disney paradigm was coming to an end, theming was still dominant. No longer based on Disney-like fantasy, resorts started to mimic other places, particularly, that evoked wealth and culture. In addition, a further consolidation of the industry occurred; all of the new resorts were partnerships between corporations. In this adults only theme park, small companies and children were gradually edged out.

In the immediate aftermath of the theme wars, resorts that had never jumped on the Disney bandwagon now boasted this explicitly in their advertising. The Riviera, for instance, promoted itself as an adults only property. It proclaimed its status graphically on a billboard advertisement, depicting two juxtaposed images: a bored child in a queue against a row of chorus girls' legs. "Safe for Adults," says the advertisement. "They Got Lines … We Got Lines." [See Image 29]

Tropicana, the resort that only a decade earlier prefigured the new resort construction with its focus on families, was the first to move away from the family image. It repositioned itself as the only adult-oriented venue on the new four corners, taking away children's menus and no longer letting anyone under 21 stay for free. "Now, if you bring a 1-year-old baby, you have to pay for that,"[93] said Bill Westerman, CEO of the company. Moreover, the Tropicana would become more upscale again, bringing back the old "Tiffany of the Strip" nickname.

Even more dramatic was the re-theming of MGM Grand. Only three years after its opening, it was slated to be remodeled. A quarter billion dollars was spent on changing the "Wizard of Oz" into the "City of Entertainment". The Yellow Brick Road was re-themed into the Studio Walk, and all the Wizard of Oz decorations were removed. The giant lion's head entrance was replaced by a 50-ton bronze lion sculpture standing on a pedestal along 80-foot entertainment walls with constantly changing multimedia projections, since Chinese guests, informed by Feng Shui, saw entering a casino through a lion's mouth as bad luck. [See Image 30] In addition, MGM Grand's theme park was gradually phased out as well. MGM realized its theme park could not really compete with Disney, since there was too little land allocated for the rides. Moreover, land on the Strip was at a premium. Therefore, the first chunk of the theme park gave way to additional convention space. Rather than presenting the elimination of the Wizard of Oz family theme as the correction of an error, it was presented as a reinvestment. "Reinvestment is the key," said Terrence Lanni, chairman of MGM Grand. "It's like when you go to Disneyland, you want to see something new."[94] But the truth was that Disney, Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and 700 cast members were laid off. Yet the emerald color of the façade still attests to its Disney history – façades are a lot more expensive to change.

None of the three new properties that opened during the second wave of new resort construction during the 1990s – the Stratosphere, Monte Carlo, and New York New York – emphasized families. Another thing that these new properties had in common was that they were joint ventures. It was a further progression of the consolidation trend in the market when ITT Sheraton and Caesars World (1994), and Circus Circus and Gold Strike Resorts (1995) – which became the largest gaming company in the world – first combined forces. Since it cost at least $400 million to enter the market on the Strip, it made sense to combine the financial strength of two big corporations.

Only a small number of operators could afford to play this game on the Strip, while the smaller players were edged out. Because big companies have lower operating costs as well as lower capital costs, they have a competitive edge over smaller properties. Large corporations could borrow at an interest rate around 8%, while smaller companies had interest rates around 14%. In addition, because gambling had been legalized in other jurisdictions, including Atlantic City, larger companies were able to invest and build their reputations in these other locations as well, making it easier for them to attract top managers as well as high rollers. Moreover, because of economies of scale, large companies could cut cost by sharing management and facilities. Finally, fewer gaming executives had the ability to control more political clout, with easier access to the country's political policymakers, which further benefitted their competitive edge. "What you're seeing now is the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer," [95] said a financial analyst of Schroeder Wertheim. If Las Vegas tells us something about capitalism at all, it is simply the old adage that capital accumulates and markets naturally skew in favor of big players.

In addition to the economic and political advantages, corporate giants used sheer physical size and urban planning to their full advantage. For instance, Circus Circus Enterprises

was a corporate heavyweight on the Strip, especially when it added 1,000 rooms to Circus Circus and 2,000 rooms to Luxor in 1996 (filling in the river Nile). After they built a new resort with Mirage in 1996, Circus Circus owned property at all four freeway exits to the Strip: Russel Road, Tropicana Avenue, Flamingo Road, and Sahara Avenue. With Mirage, their combined resorts controlled most of the three core miles on the Strip. A monorail was planned to connect all their properties. Circus Circus even built a drawbridge from Excalibur to one of the pedestrian bridges that allowed people to cross the road safely, in order to shunt them into the casino instead of the sidewalk, after which they could move into Luxor through an internal connection with a moving beltway. [See Image 31]

The consolidation trend led to a quintet of large corporations, coined as the Big Five – Mirage Resorts, Inc., Circus Circus Enterprises, Hilton Hotels Corp., MGM Grand, Inc., and ITT Corp. They held as much as 40%of the total gaming industry in Las Vegas. On the Strip, where they liked to leverage their brand name in the most visible space of the entertainment capital of the world, that percentage was much higher. The quintet owned almost all of the megaresorts.

The only new companies with a chance to enter the consolidated casino industry were global hotel and restaurant chains, either independently or in partnership with one of the Big Five. In 1995, the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino opened on Harmon Avenue, two blocks from the Strip. It was the first hotel of the Hard Rock chain, part of the themed restaurant formula that, like Disney, relied heavily on merchandising. Planet Hollywood was another restaurant chain that entered the Strip. Driven by celebrities such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis, in 1996 it announced plans to develop an $830 million property next to Desert Inn. It was a joint venture with Caesars World, subsidiary of ITT. In the meantime, ITT had already completed a large upgrade at its recently acquired Caesars Palace, which included Magical Empire, an “adult Disneyland” with 66,000 square feet of theatres and dining chambers in which guests could dine under the drama of lasers, sounds, and a cast of magicians, thespians, and illusionists. [See Image 32]

The first smaller player to be edged out was the partnership that developed the new 1,500-room Stratosphere. Completed in 1996 on the north side of the Strip, it lay just within Las Vegas city limits. Out of necessity, it was a joint venture between gaming maverick Bob Stupak, who conceived of the Stratosphere but ran into problems financing the $360 million project, and Grand Casinos. The Stratosphere was the only resort built in the 1990s that looked radically different from all the other ones, perhaps because it was conceived by an individual, rather than a corporation. It was a 1,149 foot tall tower – the tallest freestanding tower in US – topped by a twelve-story circular pod, containing an observation deck sponsored by Pepsi and a revolving restaurant. [See Image 33] The resort, which initially had a “World’s Fair” theme, had three different thrill rides on top. Another ride was planned to climb up on one of the buildings legs: a giant $6 million mechanical gorilla, affectionately called “King Kong” and “Belly of the Beast”, since it would have tourists strapped around its belly. “In New York, it was just a movie,” said Stupak on the attraction. “In Las Vegas, it’s real.”[96] It would have been a perfect simulacrum. But even though the ride had gotten approval from the city council it was

never built, especially after Stupak left and the Stratosphere declared bankruptcy within six months. A major role in the bankruptcy was the high interest rate of 14.25%. In this corporate Disneyland, only adult players survived.

On the south end of the Strip, Circus Circus Enterprises and Mirage, Inc. opened the Monte Carlo. While the Stratosphere tried to reflect attention to the neglected north end of the Strip, the new center on the Strip was towards the south. Monte Carlo was a joint venture between archrivals and historically fierce competitors Mirage, Inc., which owned the land, and Circus Circus Enterprises that would operate the resort. It only cost $344 million to build the no-thrills 3,002-room resort that was financed with a $210 million loan from equity contributions of both companies.

At the Monte Carlo, children were no longer part of the equation. Initially, the resort was to have motion machine rides but a larger adult pool area was voted in instead, with the first wave pool in the Strip. Mirage denied that it had ever intended to build resorts that catered to families. “This was never about kids,” said Mirage spokesperson Feldman who seemed to suffer from an acute case of amnesia. “This was about getting a broader market for adults.”[97]

Although the Monte Carlo was still themed, its theme was derived from an actual, rather than an imagined place. The Monte Carlo ushered in a wave of European themes. It was themed in a French *Belle Epoch* architectural style, derived from the Orient express, the railroad line between Paris and Istanbul during the romantic late nineteenth and early twentieth century. [See Image 34] Based on this story, a rendering was produced. Dougall Design had produced the research and contracted a professional renderer for the image. The rendering had to balance the expression of the theme and economic and practical considerations; it had to look buildable and financially viable. The final design incorporated several elements of the Monaco Place du Casino, Paris Opera House, and the Palace of Fine Arts building in San Francisco.[98] This single reified image mediated the entire design process. “Contractors, subcontractors, architects, and engineers all soon laid claim to holding the definitive interpretation of The Rendering, in this portion or that, of the facade, the pool, the casino, the retail street.”[99] As a result of this organization, and thanks to the Circus Circus’ in-house construction company it had acquired after taking over Gold Strike, the construction of the resort was completed before its 16-month schedule and under the $350 million budget.

The last resort of the second wave of new resort construction, New York New York, was a joint venture between MGM Grand, Inc. and Primadonna Resorts, Inc. MGM Grand contributed the site’s 18 acres, while Primadonna brought in the idea and $43 million. The rest of the financing came from a commercial bank loan. The $460 million New York New York was themed after its namesake, copying the city’s most iconic monuments. The 2,100 hotel rooms were built in a skyline of ten adjoining towers, which was actually one single structure. The skyline incorporated scaled down copies of actual New York buildings, including the Empire State Building. In front of the towers stood a 150-foot tall replica of Statue of Liberty and a 300-foot-long replica of the Brooklyn Bridge, whose cables supported the theme, not the bridge; New York New York’s Brooklyn Bridge was not an actual bridge, it was just the image of a bridge that was used

as a sidewalk. [See Images 35 and 36] Inside, New York street scenes were replicated. [See Image 37] As icing on the cake, a Coney Island rollercoaster circled around and through the fake New York skyline.

New York New York distilled the essence of New York. It was based on the image of the city as it existed in the popular imagination. The resort represented the epitome, not the photocopy, of New York City. All of the city's iconic buildings were pasted together in a pastiche scene that could never actually be photographed in New York. However, the resort's skyline looked more impressive and "real" than the Manhattan skyline. After seeing New York New York, one cannot help from being slightly disappointed with the real New York skyline. Therefore, New York New York was the quintessential simulacrum – more New York than New York: *New York New York.* [See Image 38] New York had been Disneyfied into a New York New York, turned into a cartoon-character, or rather, a caricature of itself – like drawing a Mickey from a mouse.

A peculiar anecdote reveals an additional bonus of the replica. By cannibalizing from New York City's skyline, New York New York somehow appropriated its symbolism. By citing architectural symbols of popular, political, and corporate culture of New York, New York New York had gained in symbolic capital. For instance, by copying the Statue of Liberty, the quintessential symbol of democracy and America, New York New York presented gambling as American. New York New York even had mock gravity to replicate, and substitute for, the real urbanity of New York. However, not all New Yorkers appreciated the references. Ironically, because the resort had appropriated some of the Wall Street signage, such as "New York New York Stock Exchange", "New York $lot Exchange", and "NY$E", it had unsettled the real New York Stock Exchange, which sued the resort, accusing it of tarnishing its reputation.

The very same symbolic advantage of the replica was also its weakness. To some extent, New York New York was a precedent to the new resorts of fourth building boom, in that they also took urbanity as a theme. But whereas New York New York gets its value from its reference to the real, the new resorts of the next building boom would lay a claim on authenticity. Without a need for a referent, they delivered a symbolic blow to the resort as replica.

Finally, after New York New York ended the second wave of new construction, the Strip had record-breaking tourist volumes. Most of the visitors would stay on the "Four Corners", where the world's three largest hotels – MGM Grand, Excalibur, and Luxor – all stood next to another. With the visitor volumes up, and the families deemphasized, the next step to generate more revenue was to shift upscale.

4.2.2 The Gentrification of the Strip

During the final thrust of the third building boom, when four major resorts – Bellagio, Mandalay Bay, Paris, and the Venetian – opened within a period of twelve months, the Las Vegas Strip "gentrifies". This last wave of new resorts specifically catered to the "cultured" and upscale customer, which represented a further unraveling of Disney: where during the mid-1990s, children were factored out, now the middle class was

excised. Finally, starting with Bellagio, and specifically with Mandalay, which were not nearly as themed as resorts had been before, the theming paradigm was coming to an end; instead, celebrity chefs, famous interior designers, European boutiques, and even an art museum prefigured the new direction of the Strip.

Gentrification is a term that typically denotes the process by which an appreciation in land value forces a social group to move out of its original neighborhood, in exchange for a wealthier "gentry". Gentrification can be caused either on the demand side, through the influx of people that desire to live in a certain neighborhood which pushes rents up, or on the demand side, by large developers that "upgrade" an area which increases property values. Typically, gentrification refers to housing. In this section, however, gentrification is used more broadly, and refers to the social cultural change of the commercial Strip. A change in activities on the Strip, in addition to the new images resorts took, led to the influx of a wealthier and more cultured "gentry", creating a more valuable land use market; in other words, pricier hotel rooms, restaurants, and entertainment, made the Strip more profitable for developers, brought in a wealthier demographic, while causing a shift away from gambling.

In order to make room for the new luxurious resorts, old resorts were imploded furiously. The Landmark imploded in 1995 to make way for an expansion of the Las Vegas Convention center; the resort was perhaps less of a "landmark" than its name suggested. Nonetheless, its demise made a spectacular appearance in the movie *Mars Attacks!* (1996). The Sands was imploded in 1996 for the all-suite Venetian, and on New Years Eve of 1997, and the family oriented Hacienda was blown to pieces for the new lavish Mandalay, in a live New Years Eve television special. Finally, in 1998, the old Aladdin was imploded for a new, more luxurious version of its namesake, which opened in 2000.

Based on inventive financial structures, new and more expensive resorts could "move" into the Strip. Corporate collateral financing played a large role in the building of the new resorts. Corporations leveraged their assets and took huge debts to finance further expansion, based on the assumption that they would able to pay back debt with their projected profit. A lot of the debt financing had huge interest rates. For instance, portions of the Venetian loans were 14.25 %, the same percentage that had led the Stratosphere into bankruptcy. The risks these companies took would eventually lead to another economic crisis.

Wall Steet was partly responsible for the shift in financing from equity markets to commercial banks. Gaming stocks had depreciated because of Wall Street's concern for the saturation of the gaming market. Investors were nervous about the developers' mantra: "build it and they will come." [See Image 39] If developers were to follow the old Strip philosophy – there was still tremendous optimism among developers in the power of new developments to attract additional tourists – they would have to look elsewhere for financing. Gaming corporations felt that their shares were undervalued, so they were reluctant to sell more equity. Moreover, most of the bonds sold by corporations, except for Mirage Inc., were below investment grade, which required the paying back of high interest rates. In place of the equity markets, competing with the traditional high-yield bond markets, commercial banks stepped in. Ironically, because the

reluctant investment community forced the industry to turn to banks for capital, the additional loans strained stock prices even further, making the industry more dependent on banks.

Banks increasingly got involved in the mid-1990s. In 1996, they lent $5 billion to ITT, $2 billion to Circus Circus, $1.75 billion to Mirage, and $1.25 billion to MGM Grand.[100] Even though commercial banks had financed resorts before Wall Street had, what was different this time was the size and risk of the loans. A new banking mechanism, the "collateralized loan obligation", was introduced. It secured financing against a relatively small percentage of equity, such as cash or land. This mechanism opened up bigger amounts of capital to the Strip – but at a higher risk.

The easier access to credit paralleled a national flow of liquidity, which had its roots in the deregulation of the banking industry initiated in the 1970s. Projects that previously would have had difficulty in finding capital were now able to get access to credit. The most dramatic examples of resorts financed by commercial lenders were the Venetian and Aladdin. Even though their management still had to prove itself, they received huge loans. But, in addition to the commercial loans, both projects still depended on some form of high-yield financing as well (Venetian $520 million and Aladdin $115 million).

Armed with the new funds, corporations were able to build even more expensive resorts. During the last wave of new resort construction, the typical price of a new resort on the Strip lay above the $1 billion mark. The new expensive resorts were built for a more lucrative upscale market segment. As the middle-class market was getting saturated, the industry assumed that by moving upscale it could bring an entirely new market to Las Vegas. In addition, these customers would have more money to spend. Whereas Las Vegas during the first half of the 1990s was mainly a value-driven resort destination, now resorts were getting expensive.

All the new resorts built in the late 1990s targeted consumers willing to spend more than $100 on rooms, and spend freely on dining, shopping, and entertainment. In order to lure the upscale customer, the resorts' shopping centers, convention, dining, and entertainment facilities were emphasized over their casinos. It was emblematic of a major industry shift in Las Vegas: the move from gaming to entertainment. According to statistics of the State of Nevada, since 1996, non-gaming revenues amenities, such as shopping, shows, and dining, generated more revenue than gambling. It led the Las Vegas Visitors and Convention Authority to describe Las Vegas as an "entertainment resort destination" rather than a "gaming resort destination" in their 1998-1999 marketing plan. Since the Strip had turned into a complete entertainment destination, with celebrity chef restaurants, Broadway-quality shows, and Rodeo Drive-like shopping, it was now able to compete for the upscale customer that would otherwise go on far-away vacations, to Europe, for instance. It is no surprise then, that three out of the four new properties were themed in a European style: Bellagio, the Venetian, and Paris. Initially, executives did not admit that the diversification of the industry on the Strip mattered to the gaming companies. "We're rather indifferent as to which cash register we pull the dollars out of at the end of the day. What we want is to make sure that we own all the cash registers,"[101]

said Schaeffer. Actually, by providing a host of luxurious services, resorts were able to attract a wealthier clientele. Through the provision of designer boutiques, celebrity chef restaurants, and critically acclaimed shows, resort developers had gradually gentrified the Las Vegas Strip.

Wynn's fourth property on the Strip, the Bellagio, ushered in the third wave of new resort construction. Costing $1.6 billion, it was the most expensive and opulent resort the Strip had seen. With average room rates of $200 a night, about 30% more than the Mirage cost at the time, Bellagio was meant for the upscale customer. Wynn reasoned that with 90,000 hotel rooms in town, 3% of those could be costing more. However, when other developers followed a similar philosophy, the Strip's gentrification brutally met its limitations.

Jerde Partnerships designed the themed facades and interiors, which were themed in Northern Italian and Renaissance, specifically from the region of Lake Como. There was reasoning behind this choice of theme. "Bellagio is designed to be an alternative to Paris on a weekend,"[102]said Wynn. To capture the upscale customer who, for instance, would have otherwise liked to visit a chic part of Europe, the theme was quite literally taken from Europe. They could now spend their money in European boutiques of Bellagio instead. However, the Bellagio was not as nearly as themed as, for instance, the Mirage or Treasure Island. It illustrated that the architectural practice of theming was coming to an end. However, they still produced a script for Bellagio. The wealthy Count and Countess of Bellagio had an estate in Las Vegas, because of the good weather condition beneficial to the count's asthma. Their financial difficulties led Wynn to buy the property, while making public the treasures that were previously private. If Wynn previously portrayed himself as Walt Disney, he now imagined himself as nouveaux riche, a newborn European aristocrat, and Las Vegas' cultural benefactor.

The shift to a more high-end clientele was accompanied by more design-driven restaurants, commissioned from Tony Chi, Jeffrey Beers, and Adam Tihany, and staffed by celebrity chefs. The 100,000-square-foot VIA Bellagio included boutiques from Chanel, Hermes, Tiffany & Co., Armani, Gucci, and Prada. Cirque de Soleil provided entertainment with their new show "O" – the most impressive Cirque show so far, being performed in, on, and above a 1.5 million gallon pool, in a theatre reminiscent of Paris Opera House. [See Image 40] In order to provide a high level of service, 8,000 employees staffed the 3,000-room resort. Finally, children were less welcome than before. "With Bellagio, we will be a little more aggressive in telling our guests that if they have anyone in their party under 21 they might reconsider staying at Bellagio," [103] said spokesperson Alan Feldman.

Importantly, art and nature were integrated throughout the resort. A $300 million art gallery, the first on the Strip, featured works of Van Gogh, Renoir, Monet, and Cézanne. Where in the old days signs announced the entertainers, Wynn used a 90-foot-tall sign: "Coming soon: VAN GOGH MONET RENOIR and CEZANNE." A 50,000 pound glass-blown ceiling designed by Dale Chihuly, "The Flowers of Como", with 2,000 multicolored glass flowers, decorated the lobby. However, the art piece was forced to

mold itself to the context of the Las Vegas Strip, when Wynn demanded twice as many flowers as the artist originally intended, in order to increase its visual impact. [See Image 41] The resort also contained a conservatory and botanical gardens.

The Bellagio's main exterior feature on the Strip was a $40 million water ballet. A giant setback separated the resort from the Strip, to accommodate a lake with a musical fountain spanning 1,000 feet. [See Image 42] Every fifteen minutes, under-water cannons shot 75-gallon water-bursts up to 240 feet in the sky, to music ranging from Elvis to Luciano Pavarotti, dramatically dropping the desert temperature. The show drew big crowds; in order to accommodate them all pedestrian sidewalks were widened and alcoves surrounded the lake. As a result of his new masterpiece, *Time Magazine* called Wynn "The master builder of Vegas". Yet Wynn was unhappy with the fact that his masterpiece would significantly increase the value of his competition's real estate. For instance, Paris Las Vegas, opposite Bellagio, boasted that its rooms had the best view of the fountains. The spectacle created by Wynn added to the symbolic capital of neighboring resorts. [See Image 43]

The Bellagio, in particular, was credited with breaking away from the Disney mold. In addition, it devalued the symbolic capital of the previous Disney-like properties. Howard Klein, consulting editor of *Gaming Marketer,* noted the shift:

> "… just as Mirage obsoleted so many 'pre-Disney' properties, Bellagio to a degree will obsolete some appeal of the Mirage and all the other properties during that same booming era of growth. To say that newer is better is an oversimplification. It would be an intellectual conceit of the highest order to presume that newness and novelty alone are the reasons Bellagio will attract new patrons who might have otherwise gone elsewhere. Something far more profound occurred when the Italianate property opened. The Disney version died."[104]

Circus Circus Enterprises built Mandalay Bay on the former site of Hacienda, the most southern property on the Strip. Now the company owned all three properties on the block between Tropicana and Russell Road: Excalibur, Luxor, and Mandalay Bay. It had been aiming for this "Masterplan Mile" throughout the nineties, and now managed to have a contiguous piece of 236 acres of real estate along the Strip. Mandalay Bay, with rooms that cost on average $110, about 25% more than Luxor, went after a more upscale market segment as well. Although the project was tropically themed, it was not nearly as heavily themed as Circus Circus' previous properties. [See Image 44] The $950 million hotel had a shark reef, two aquariums, a wave pool with a fake beach, and a 30,000-square-foot spa. [See Image 45]

Moreover, Mandalay Bay experimented with a new business model. Mandalay Bay's upper four floors hosted a separate Four Seasons Hotel. It was the first time that multiple brands of hotels appeared within the same complex. In addition, the introduction of the five star boutique hotel, with room rates between $200 and $500 for its basic rooms, attracted people that had never been to Las Vegas before. The Four Seasons, a "hotel within a hotel", had a private entrance on Strip. It seemed a logical trend in the evolution of ever-larger casino complex. As resorts were getting bigger, they started to differentiate

within their own properties. This was a further diversification of the hotel offerings. Moreover, by partnering with outside operators, the resorts were less subject to risk and could focus on other aspects of the resort, such as the casino. Finally, in order to provide a level of service that was uncommon to the resort operator, it was easier to bring in an outside operator.

Although for the more seasoned Las Vegas Strip resort operators Mirage, Inc. and Circus Circus Enterprises, theming was nearing its end, as seen in their Bellagio and Mandalay Bay, the last two properties in the third wave of new construction, the Venetian and Paris, were highly themed. The two resorts, developed by the less experienced Strip resort builders Adelson and Hilton, fully embraced the theming paradigm. Since theming had been tested already, there was less risk in taking that approach. And so two of the most themed properties the Strip had seen came at the end of the building boom.

Sheldon Adelson developed the Venetian. A self-made man, he built the COMDEX computer show into world's largest trade show. After he and his partners sold it in 1995 for almost $900 million, he bought the Sands Expo and Convention Center. Adelson planned a new upscale property on the 63-acre site of the Sands, while excluding unions and refusing to give preference to Sands' laid-off employees. He contributed $95 million in cash, $225 million in land, while securing the rest through a collection of public bonds and commercial bank loans, to fund the resort.

The 3,036-room Venetian tower was the first phase of a complex of two Y-shaped towers totaling 6,000 rooms. In 1996, Adelson imploded the Sands tower to make way for the Venetian. It represented another blow to the previous architectural era of the pop sign. Stern's sculptural tower had been decimated; highly themed architecture came in its place. [See Image 46] The Venetian would become the most literally themed property on the Strip. Adelson's wife, who remembered from their honeymoon that Venice was "enchanting", conceived of the theme. Therefore, Adelson modeled the resort after its Italian namesake.

Its focus on conventions, suites, and high-end retail made the Venetian one of the most upscale properties on the Strip. The Venetian was solely dedicated to serving the convention market. Since it was connected to the Sands Expo and Convention Center, it had a total of 1.6 million square feet of convention space, including an 85,000 square foot pillar-less ballroom, the largest in the United States. The Venetian had about as much convention space as the Las Vegas Convention Center, owned by the Las Vegas Visitors and Convention Authority, which Adelson was known to criticize, claiming it should become private. Also different from other resorts was that all of the Venetian's rooms were suites. Besides conventions, retail and restaurants also played an important part in the resort. Las Vegas Sands, Inc. partnered with developer TrizecHahn on its 500,000-square-foot retail area: the Shoppes. The $250 million shopping complex had 70 retail stores, including a $16 million Madame Tussaud's (of course), all of which were fronted by a 630-foot replica of Venice's Grand Canal. [See Image 47] Finally, the Venetian boasted it did not have a buffet – a symptom of the changing times on the Strip in which $5.99 buffets were gradually edged out for fine dining prepared by pricey celebrity chefs.

The Venetian drew from Venice's styles and influences spanning hundreds of years, "from the Gothicism of the Ca' d'Oro to the Baroque of the Bridge of Sighs, form the Classical influence of the Campanile Tower to the variety of styles of palazzi – all have been meticulously reproduced here at The Venetian."[105] But unlike previous attempts of theming on the Strip, Adelson wanted an exact replica. "We believe New York New York is a 'faux' New York. We are not going to build a 'faux' Venice. We're going to build what is essentially the *real* Venice,"[106] he said. To secure authenticity, Adelson and his architectural team went to Venice on several trips. In addition, an architectural consultant from Venice was hired to enable the accuracy of details.

Despite Adelson's concern for "authenticity", spectacle prevailed. In a composition that was unlike the real Venice, a scaled-down Campanile Bell Tower, Rialto Bridge, and Doge's Palace were placed next to another. It made a more impressive front on the Strip. [See Image 48] Adelson's concept of authenticity lay more in the accurate reproduction of each individual element. A main colonnade with 25-foot columns made out of solid Botticino marble led to the entrance. Like Venice, the Ventian had a St. Mark's Square and a Grand Canal, as well as a 65-foot high ceiling decorated with reproductions of Titian and Tintoretto, hand-painted by Italian artists. In addition, Venice's arched bridges, cobbled walkways, and facades prevailed throughout the property, some of which were exact one-to-one replicas. Artisans, glassblowers, and singers throughout the property had to bring in the spirit of the yearly Carnivale celebration in Venice. [See Image 49] To top things off, gondoliers singing "A sole mio" steered their gondolas through the canal system, one floor above the casino, both inside as well as outside the building. [See Image 50] The resort became a must-see attraction for anyone staying on the Strip.

The "authenticity" by which the Venetian reproduced Venice sparked a debate on authenticity. Some saw the new technologies that enabled the mechanical reproduction of buildings as a threat to the original, and an end of authenticity. In the construction of the Venetian, laser scanners were used to perfectly reproduce Venice's facades and architectural elements. The irony is that the Venetian's tremendous concern for 'authenticity', led some to theorize the end of authenticity. Walter Benjamin had already the end of authenticity in the work or art because of technological innovations in his 1936 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Moreover, he claimed, in the age of mechanical reproduction, there is no longer a technical need for the presence of an original. However, at the basis of Venice's reproduction in the Venetian, lies the appreciation for the original. The replica is consumed, because the original is worth it, and in a way pays homage to it. And as the Venetian later reproduced itself in a similar version in Macau, the Macau Venetian still paid tribute to the original Venice, rather than the Venetian in Vegas.

Others, saw the Venetian as an original creation, rather than and "unauthentic" replica. Even though it literally copied architectural icons, these elements were remade and reassembled in a new and "authentic" way. For instance, Franci dedicated an entire book to the copy in Las Vegas, *Dreaming of Italy: Las Vegas and the Virtual Grand Tour*, in

which she compares the simulated monuments to their Italian originals, concluding that, despite copying elements of other places, they are nonetheless authentic creations.[107]

However, because the reproductions get embedded with meaning beyond their original context, they alter the frame of reference, and cause a hyperreal situation. The Venetian is above all an adaptation, rather than an exact replica. For instance, because it is not an actual city, it can be cleaner, have better water quality, and hire gondoliers that are professional singers. Moreover, its canals hover above a casino floor, and the sky is permanently blue. In a way, it is more impressive than the original; therefore, it is hyperreal. Baudrillard explained how hyperreality was brought about by the "meticulous reproduction of the real, preferable through another reproductive medium such as advertising or photography, and that during their multiple medium reproductions, reality itself became unstable and hyperreal."[108] The same goes for the reproduction of the built environment. The extraordinary copy can destabilize the frame of reference, and become more desirable than the original, and at one point, seem more authentic than the real Venice.

Paris Las Vegas, another literally themed property, ended the third building boom on the Strip. Hilton, a company that usually operates and expands conservatively, participated in the buying spree and building craze on the Strip. It bought Bally's and neighboring lots in 1996, on which it built Paris Las Vegas in 1999, and connected it to Bally's. By then it had already bought Grand Casino and Caesars Palace. After the takeover, Park Place Entertainment Corp., the gaming division of Hilton, had become the largest gaming company in the world in only one year from its inception, with almost 30,000 rooms spread all over the world. In Las Vegas, Hilton owned the Flamingo, Las Vegas Hilton, Caesars Palace, Bally's, and Paris Las Vegas.

In what was a radical departure from the otherwise more corporate looking hotels of the company, the $785 million Paris Las Vegas was themed after Paris. It had an Eiffel Tower half the size of the original, its gigantic legs standing partly on the Strip, partly inside the casino, to make it visible all the time. [See Image 51] Other features included a replica of the Paris Opera, a two-thirds replica of the Arc de Triomphe, and a replica of Pont Alexander III. [See Image 52] The 34-story hotel tower, which contains 2,916 rooms, was modeled after Hotel de Ville. [See Images 53 and 54] Architect Joel Bergman had made two trips to Paris with his team to research the essence of the monuments they sought to duplicate. He even purchased a "white glove" set of books by Gustave Eiffel, which contained the original 1889 drawings. Again, a temporal bracket was created for the resort. "We've re-created a Paris street scene, reminiscent of the city in 1920, 1925. That's the Paris that most people think of ... the Paris between the two (world) wars ... the Paris they know from Ernest Hemingway's `The Sun Also Rises', "[109] said Silverman, who was responsible of the theming of the resorts public interiors.

With Paris Las Vegas, the third wave of new resort construction of the third building boom on the Strip came to an end. The only new resort under construction was one planned by Planet Hollywood and Aladdin, which would open in 2000 at a cost of $1.3 billion. During the last few years of the 1990s, Las Vegas almost added 20,000 to the city's total inventory of 100,000, and most of them were on the Strip. Some questioned

whether there would be sufficient demand for the new room supply. With the market getting saturated, and stocks underperforming, many developers put off their planned resorts.

At the end of the millennium, the Strip looked radically different from only a decade before. The monuments once celebrated by Wolfe and Venturi were blown up one by one. The new casinos were bigger, typically containing 3,000 rooms with a height of 35 floors, and heavily themed, some of them fronted by theme-park-like attractions. [See Image 55] The Strip itself had become a destination in its own right, and tourists marveled at the free sights and wonders. The casinos changed the nature of the Strip into a more pedestrian, dense, and lively urban environment. At the same time, the Strip started to develop offshoots. Several hotels and casinos mushroomed on Harmon corridor: Flamingo and Tropicana, which tended to cater more to locals than to tourists. With the added weight to these perpendicular roads on the Strip, its once-obvious linearity would be broken, changing its geometry from a simple line into a region. The Las Vegas Strip was no longer a strip; it had turned into a boulevard.

As Venturi had theorized the Las Vegas Strip as the archetype of the automobile-oriented street, the new Strip had turned into a pedestrian promenade. In fact, the Las Vegas Strip had become one of the most pedestrian-oriented urban areas in the American West. The great irony was that corporatism, rather than planning theory, had caused the shift. One of the reasons for the change was that during the third building boom, the Strip nearly doubled the amount of hotel rooms on the Strip. The increased density and the added theme-park-like attractions had turned the Strip from a vehicular oriented street into a more pedestrian environment. Fueled by competition, the Strip turned out to be a relatively walkable, active, and dense place. Architectural critic Paul Goldberger commended the Strip precisely for this reason, as a rare exception to the trend of mall-enclosed pedestrianism: “Urban activity for most people in this country occurs in private, enclosed places, like malls and atriums, and, while in one sense Las Vegas represents the absolute triumph of the private realm – these casino hotel’s aren’t exactly efforts at public enterprise – it ends up staking an odd claim for the public realm.”[110]

In addition, the Las Vegas Strip thrived with public activity. Unlike Disneyland, the Las Vegas Strip is public. As Las Vegas was growing, the Strip would be the site of struggle between the demands of gaming corporations and locals. As a result, the Las Vegas Strip was becoming less like Disneyland every day. For instance, AlSayyad offers an account of the use of public space on the Las Vegas Strip. Conceived “fake spaces” such as the Las Vegas Strip, can be just as “real” as any other place, providing for public activities such as street hawking and protest. He compared the New York Times Square with the sidewalk in front of New York New York. Mayor Giuliani had Disneyfied New York Times Square, made it “safe”, getting rid of prostitution and street hawking, or rather, displacing it. Even the Disney Company occupied a part of the square, which by the end of the 1990s looked completely. At the same time, the space in front of New York New York was thriving with public life, characterized with all the “messiness” of a real city, which New York Times Square had before, for instance smut peddlers handing out leaflets, and hawkers sold souvenirs, particularly after 9/11. This led AlSayyad to ask the following question: “Has Las Vegas become *the* real [New York] city?”[111]

Another issue that spoke for the Las Vegas Strip, and a major difference with Disneyland, is that unlike Disneyland, at the Strip you didn't need to pay for a ticket. Everybody could look at the urban attraction of the Strip for free. Like the Last Frontier Village had provided free entertainment as a marketing gimmick, corporations had turned the Strip turned into an open-air theatre; the resorts provided the shows, the sidewalks acted as the stage. There was no other place in the world where a live sea battle, a Sphinx, the Eiffel Tower, and Venetian canals were all lined up along one single street: free for everyone to see.

By the end of the third building boom, the future was looking bright for the Las Vegas. The city surpassed Mecca in 1999 as the most visited tourist destination on earth, [112] with almost 36 million visitors in 2000. [113] The 2000 census counted 1.37 million residents in the Las Vegas Metropolitan Area. Some even coined Las Vegas "the Las Detroit", [114] since, unlike Disneyland, most of the workers in resorts were unionized, and put a check on corporations through organization and strikes. Las Vegas became one of the few places in the United States where low educated workers could live a middle class life, thanks to this union labor in addition to cheap housing; until the full collapse of corporate collateral financing unraveled this joint workers and corporate paradise, and the most severe economic crisis to date hit the Las Vegas Strip.

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Chapter Five: Starchitecture: The Global Branding of the Strip (2001–Present)

5.1 Starchitecture

5.1.1 9/11 and the Fall of Aladdin

5.1.2 High-Brow Architecture, Low-Brow Content

5.1.3 What Happens in Vegas™

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"When culture becomes nothing more than a commodity, it must also become the star commodity of the spectacular society".[1]

- Guy Debord. *The Society of the Spectacle*, "Thesis 193"

During the fourth building boom, the Las Vegas Strip turns into a landscape of "starchitecture". Resorts took a contemporary style of architecture, some of them designed by world famous architects. The concentration of star architects on the Strip was paralleled by the presence of famous interior designers, contemporary artists, and celebrity chefs. By the end of the fourth building boom, the Strip appeared to be a major hub of elite culture, and it increasingly exported its models globally.

I claim that at the heart of this shift lies a process of global branding. At a time when elite architecture takes ever more exuberant shapes and gets appropriated by corporations as part of their global brand identity, so the Strip adopts an architecture that initially mimics and, later actually is, star architecture. The new architecture devalues the previous phase of replicas, by laying a claim on authenticity, as well as on the global stardom of the individual architects. Themed resorts designed by relatively anonymous architects were no longer desirable; instead, elite culture – whether art, architecture, or haute cuisine – had become the new fetish and commodity on the Strip. The shift coincides with the more intense global branding of the Strip. Las Vegas resorts, increasingly financed with global capital, start to outsource most of their traditional operations in order to focus on producing brands that can be exported to other countries, such as China. In short, the fourth building boom is defined by the spectacle of starchitecture, the global branding of the Strip.

"Starchitecture" is a neologism that is a conjunction of "star" and "architecture", used as a term since around 2001. It refers to the elevated media status of the architect, the so-called celebrity architect, as well as the way in which city leaders, as well as corporations around the world, in the late 1990s and throughout the beginning of the 21st century, increasingly commission famous architects to design a landmark building. As architectural images circulate in the image economy, or "iconomy",[2] celebrity architects

were deemed necessary in the production of a successful built environment, which could be reproduced as images globally.

The phenomenon occurred in public buildings as much as corporate architecture. Cities, vying for capital in a race of global interurban competition, assume their success lies on the building of their international reputation and image, rather than providing services or infrastructure to the local population. [3] As a result, they increasingly commissioned starchitects to raise the profile of the city. The Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry, is often cited as the paradigmatic example of the transformative effects of star architecture on cities. In 1997, the Guggenheim, which was becoming a global brand of culture – almost a franchise– opened a branch in Bilbao. Gehry designed an expensive building out of exuberantly formed titanium sheets, which was critiqued as "an image accumulated to the point where it becomes capital."[4] However, the consensus was that the building singlehandedly renewed tourist interest in Bilbao. And indeed, the old industrial city had been put firmly on the cultural map. As a result, the process by which starchitecture can transform a city has been coined the "Bilbao effect".

High-end brands had used architects to blur elite culture with consumerism as well. Star architecture was deemed an important part of corporate brand strategy. For instance, university campuses, hotels, fashion stores, car dealerships, and banks, have tried to attract celebrity architects to design buildings, with the presumption that the architectural signatures of the starchitects allowed corporations to disseminate the images of their buildings to a global audience, establish a brand identity, and strategically associate themselves with the brand of well-known architects. In addition, the architects helped elevate the exhibition of the commodity. The European furniture company Vitra was a corporation on the early verge of the trend. Ever since the 1980s, it commissioned Grimshaw, Siza, Hadid, Ando, and Gehry as architects of its facilities. Now, a plethora of architects and high-end brand teamings decorate the glossy magazines. For instance, recently architects and high-end boutiques partnerships include Ando with Armani, Gehry with Miyaki, and Koolhaas with Prada.

The terms starchitecture and starchitect have a strong pejorative connotation. The exuberant shapes are often critiqued of having a lack of local context, being anti-functional, with the sole purpose of being iconic and clearly visible in context. This is the architecture of spectacle as opposed to use[5], obsessed with creating a "wow factor" that puts the circulation of images in the media above the actual use and lived experience of the building. In addition, the brand name of the architect is often deemed more important than the quality of the actual architecture. Some of the starchitects have been mocked as caricatures of themselves, constantly repeating the same iconic forms, their work as well as persona stuck in a mold that conforms with the "image" of the architect. At the same time, the term also denotes celebrities turned architects, for instance Brad Pitt.

The starchitecture trend was historically new on the Las Vegas Strip. Although the Strip had its share of elite architects involved in its theorization, they were never involved in the architectural production of the Strip. However, famous contemporary architecture had been mimicked before, most notably the UNESCO headquarters, the modernist icon, by

the International, even though this was never directly stated. Because elite architecture in 21st century evolved in ever more expressive forms, relying on shock and awe formalism, it could come to the Strip as a fierce rival to the highly thematic architecture. During the first part of the new building boom, resorts mimic the star architecture, whereas towards the end, actual starchitects get involved in the design of resorts. The contemporary forms and facades of the new resorts replace the fetish of the urban theme park like attraction, ultimately making the resort typology more inward again. In short, during the fourth building boom on the Strip, starchitecture becomes the new theme, commodity, and fetish.

At the start of the new paradigm, trade magazines and professional literature declared the end of theming. *Casino Design*, a yearly trade magazine founded in 2003 that was solely dedicated to the design of casinos, discussed the issue extensively. The existence of the magazine illustrated the importance the gaming industry now attributed to architecture. [See Image 1] A roundtable debate organized by the magazine, "Theming: Dead or Alive," asked, "Has the themed casino finally gone the way of the dodo?" [6] One of the designers, previously involved in theming resorts, replied: "Yes. Thank God."[7] The designers recognized a generational shift underlying the death of the theme. It was assumed that the new target demographic, generation X, or people under 40, didn't identify with seeing a copy of a place as much as their parents. "The millennial generation is all good looking people," said a designer. "They're thin, they work out, they're going to have more money and have more privileged lives. They have explored places, and, if they haven't, they think they will. Their perception is, going to a faux reproduction isn't good,"[8] he said. For the more affluent and young brand-conscious customer, high-end modern design, rather than theming, was considered a more socially acceptable aesthetic.

In reaction to the term of theming, the industry needed a name that signified this new architectural paradigm shift: "branding". The term was popular among marketeers who now considered architecture a new important terrain on which to shape customer experience.[9] By 2005, the consensus of the casino design industry was that branding had replaced theming as the new formula for success. Among designers, there was consensus over the difference between the two architectural practices. Theming, they claimed, was a way of *transporting* the customer to another place and another time, whereas branding was focused on *transforming* the customer. The brand was supposed to work aspirationally, since people bought into a certain lifestyle that was associated with the brand. "We still transport people, but through lifestyles. These lifestyle trends are usually aspirational, making people feel richer, younger, sexier, stylish, famous, beautiful and fun,"[10] said Friedmutter, whose company previously designed themed environments on the Strip. According to a 2008 *Casino Design* roundtable, "clean, edgy, contemporary" design was considered dominant, and, "green is grand"; towards the end of the building boom, sustainability had become a new paradigm as well.

However, the difference between theming and branding was not as clear-cut as professionals assumed, nor was branding new to the Strip. First of all, a theme could be a brand, to be replicated in different places, and exported globally. For instance,

Disneyland is as much a themed, as a branded type of architecture. The corporate model of branding does not necessarily correlate with starchitecture. Yet, branding as an architectural practice refers to un-themed architecture, which lays a claim on authenticity and originality, and often involves star architects. However, in the context of the Strip between a range of themed buildings, star architecture appeared as another theme that instead of Disney, takes cultural and corporate elitism as a theme.

During the fourth building boom, the corporate model of branding gains in speed on the Strip. From an operational standpoint, corporations focus on the creation of brands and outsource parts of the traditional resort industry. Finally, it culminates as an aesthetic of starchitecture. Even elite architects have accepted the term *brandscape* as a term that justifies their involvement with the making of brand identities and facilities.

From a historical perspective, it must be noted that branding was neither a modern-day phenomenon, nor was it new to the Strip. Pottery and porcelain from as far back as 1300 BC in China, Greece, Rome, and India had been branded with a potter's mark. In the thirteenth century, England required goldsmiths, silversmiths, and bakers to put their marks on their goods to insure honesty in measurement. Branding played an instrumental role in the industrial revolution, as it functioned as a symbolic "trust" between people and the product, an incentive for people to abandon their local products in favor of the mass produced. In the early nineteenth century, companies that sold tobacco and patented medicines, such as Procter and Gamble, started branding their products. Branding did not stay reserved to consumer goods in the traditional sense; it increasingly applied to people, organizations, services, and cities. Branding became a central term in the discourse on architectural design when corporations started to consider architecture as an important terrain in which to shape customers' experiences, a vital physical interface between the customer and the brand.

Branding was not new to the Strip either. Gaming companies in Las Vegas had already produced brands which they exported to other cities. The Golden Nugget for instance, had exported its brand to Atlantic City in 1980 and Laughlin in 1984. In addition, already in the 1990s, resorts had partnered with existing brands to create a "synergy", as had Stratosphere and MGM Grand.

However, branding had become increasingly relevant to the Las Vegas Strip in the new millennium, because the gaming industry was expanding, both nationally and globally, and consolidating. Previously, gambling was confined to only two major sites in the United States, Las Vegas and Atlantic City. With gaming corporations expanding nationally to Indian reservations, riverboats, and other jurisdictions that allowed gambling, such as New Orleans and Detroit, the building of a brand made sense for corporations. Moreover, Las Vegas-based gaming corporations expanded globally, specifically to Asia in places such as Macau and Singapore. The notion was that people who had visited a specific brand in one place would be inclined to visit it in another. Corporations used architecture as a site to develop their global brand; therefore, resorts were no longer designed on an individual basis.

From an operational standpoint, the practice of branding led companies to outsource more of their traditional operations, in order to focus on the creation and export of brands.

> "... corporations should not expend their finite resources on factories that will demand physical upkeep, on machines that will corrode or on employees who will certainly age and die. Instead, they should concentrate those resources in the virtual brick and mortar used to build their brands"[11]

Indeed, resorts increasingly lease out the spaces they had traditionally operated, except for the casino. Even hotel rooms were outsourced, by attracting other hotel brands to operate the rooms, and even by selling off condominiums. Instead, corporations built brands, global models of resorts that were to be exported to other places. Brands were credited as an important tool that allowed corporations to grow.

> The astronomical growth in the wealth and cultural influence of multi-national corporations over the last fifteen years can arguably be traced back to a single, seemingly innocuous idea developed by management theorists in the mid-1980s: that successful corporations must primarily produce brands, as opposed to products.[12]

Resorts on the Strip in the new millennium aggressively expanded. By the end of the fourth building boom, the gaming corporations that were originally native to Las Vegas, now operated globally, with their biggest presence in Macau, where Las Vegas Sands, MGM Grand, and Wynn hold a major representation. As a result, Macau is now trademarked in the phrase "Asia's Las Vegas", and it even has the Cotai Strip, modeled after the Las Vegas Strip.

In addition, the gaming industry used brands to cater to different market segments; a natural result of the increased consolidation. Larger corporations differentiated into a series of brands underneath a single corporate umbrella. Park Place, for instance, had Hilton, Caesars, Sheraton, Paris, and Bally's, each meant for a different target demographic. In 2003, the company rebranded its corporate name to Caesars Entertainment, since Caesars had better "unaided brand recognition". At the same time, Circus Circus Enterprises renamed itself Mandalay Resort Group, a name more fitting for the new upscale nature of its brands. The company that had grown by catering to families and the middle class at Circus Circus now associated itself more with the luxury it offered with Mandalay Bay. All these corporations used their brands as a tool to obfuscate the true nature of property relations; although the Strip is marked by difference, the resorts are owned by very few corporations.

Branding as a strategy did not confine itself to resorts as a whole. Individual operators – whether nightclubs, restaurants, hotels, or residential communities – focused on the production and export of brands also. In effect, they commodified "lifestyles", a unique personal experience for individual customers, which then gets standardized and multiplied. Resorts increasingly brought in these operators, and not only outsourced the operation of its facilities, as well as its design. And since these individual operators were in charge of some of the most expensive commercial space in the United States, they had

money to spend on famous designers. “I discovered that Las Vegas is a great place for designers. Money is not an issue here,” said one interior designer.[13]

Now that elite architects were designing commercial spaces on the Strip, architectural critics were presented with a dilemma. Ironically, the architectural establishment, previously appalled by the Disney-like architecture of the Strip, would now play an active role in shaping it. Even Venturi, who had praised the “vernacular” architecture of the Strip, never built anything in the city. It is one thing for elite architects to appreciate the commercial architecture on the Strip; it is another to participate in it. No longer could the architectural elite posit the Las Vegas Strip as culturally incorrect. As a result, they started to develop a more ambiguous relationship with the Strip. Because buildings on the Strip had appropriated culturally correct shapes and forms, designed by the taste makers in the architectural scene, the Las Vegas Strip had to be re-theorized. Complicit in the production of the Las Vegas Strip, elite architects could no longer easily dismiss Las Vegas; the new label for the Strip was the ambiguous term of *brandscape*.

As elite architects were now involved in the production of branded commercial environments, they had to reevaluate their critical position in light of this development. Rem Koolhaas, for instance, elevated the brand both in his practice and pedagogy. “Shopping is the arguably the last remaining form of public activity,” he claimed in his *Harvard Design Guide to Shopping*, which has an extensive feature on the Las Vegas Strip. The book was published a year after Koolhaas had designed a branch of the Guggenheim in the Venetian.

Similarly, Anna Klingmann studied Las Vegas as paradigmatic site of the brandscape. Her book, *Brandscape*, attempts to understand, exploit, and even subvert the brand. Klingmann distances herself from the simple dismissal of brands as commodification: “Brands play a major role in shaping global culture and in formulating people’s expectations and hopes about themselves.”[14] Architects, she claims, should latch onto the brand as a powerful tool to unleash cultural values and difference. “The question is how architects might creatively employ branding in order to promote cultural values that respect the heterogeneity of places and that align city-marketing activities with broader, inclusive objectives of urban development.”[15] Moreover, she claims that branded architecture has a potential to make architecture more meaningful and sensual. “Unlike the short-lived images of dazzling signature projects, architecture that uses branding strategies can effect lasting, meaningful changes …”[16] Discussing architecture as a brand releases it “from its formal, aesthetic, and moralizing corset” and helps “meaningful effects and experiences to take hold.”

Not all architectural critics were equally enamored about the participation of architects in the production of the Strip’s brandscape. “Branding is the quintessence of the new Vegas,” wrote Michael Sorkin of the new Las Vegas Strip. “It isn’t so much that the idea of the brand is extended but that the concatenation is so extreme.” Sorkin did not appreciate the crossing over of branding into architecture. “The advocacy of branding is a sell-out in architecture, reducing its meanings to mere advertising, a fine obliviousness to the larger social implications of architectural practice,” he argued. "Branding space is disembodied space."[17]

The new theorization of Las Vegas as brandscape can be interpreted as a revival of *Learning from Las Vegas*, which urged architects to appreciate the commercial architecture of the Las Vegas Strip. Hal Foster recognized that Venturi had studied the Strip as a populist landscape with brands.[18] In studying the Strip, Foster claimed, Venturi had conflated the commercial with the civic, and trademarks with public symbols. But the main difference between the new commercial architecture and that documented in *Learning from Las Vegas*, was that now elite architects were actually involved in the production of this commercial landscape: the brandscape.

From a more critical perspective, the increased importance of branding on the Strip can be explained as follows: Branding offered a relatively cheap way to increase profit. Branding added symbolic value to a commodity, which was often less expensive than making things functionally better. According to sociologist Jean Baudrillard, in order to understand today's consumer's society, we need to add the concept of symbolic value to the Marxist categories of use and exchange value. Today, he claims, most objects are status objects; their symbolic value reigns supreme, superseding the use and exchange value of a commodity. New symbolic commodities – objects, services, or experiences – keep being invented and consumed, allowing capitalism to sustain itself, even when the material needs of a population have already been satisfied.[19] If the Strip had, during the early 1990s mass-produced the Las Vegas vacation – also symbolically constructed, rather than an innate need – at the turn of the millennium, in order to generate more revenue, symbolic value was added through branding. Instead of simply increasing the supply of rooms, it was more profitable to distinguish rooms symbolically. And architects were complicit in this semiological processing of the Fordist world.

Of course, the Strip had used branding as a tool before. But what was historically different was the role of elite culture in producing symbolic differences between resorts. Elite culture had become the new fetish on the Las Vegas Strip.

5.1.1 9/11 and the Fall of Aladdin

Once again, an economic crisis forced the Strip to redefine itself. At the beginning of the new millennium, gaming stock fell because of Wall Street's concern about declining profits. The legalization of gambling in Indian reservations by California voters in 2000, plus the bursting of the dot-com bubble, added to the stress. But the Strip suffered most because of 9/11. It took at least two years before gaming companies' revenues were back to pre-9/11 levels.

As a result of the economic crisis, the Strip redefined itself once more. It aspired to tap into a new, younger, and wealthier demographic. Resorts changed their image as a consequence. After the fall of Aladdin, the architectural practice of theming was considered outdated. High-end architecture and interior design, some of it designed by celebrity architects, increasingly made its way to the Strip.

The events of 9/11 set an important context for this chapter. There was a direct connection between the collapse of the World Trade Center in New York and the fall of Aladdin in Las Vegas, the latest resort on the Strip. This relationship is worth exploring because Aladdin's fall had major implications for the Strip. First, it gave the final

deathblow to the theming paradigm. Secondly, Aladdin was taken over by a new global chain, emblematic of the new regime of global capital about to define the Las Vegas Strip – economically as well as aesthetically.

9/11 had important implications for the Strip, both real and symbolic. With airports shut down nationwide, and people afraid of flying, the Las Vegas Strip suffered. For about three weeks, no guests flew to Las Vegas. Even the Bellagio had to temporarily close two out of its three wings. A little over three weeks after the event, more than 15,000 casino jobs and thousands of hotel jobs had been lost in Las Vegas.[20] It took six weeks before occupancy rates were up again to 60%.[21] It was the first time since the 1980s that the Las Vegas Strip had taken a major hit. It would take more than two years for resorts to get their revenues up to pre-9/11 levels.[22]

But above all, 9/11 was a "hopeless symbolic gesture".[23]Although razing the World Trade Center in New York perhaps did not really cripple the powers in the system of global capitalism, it did afflict them symbolically. Images of the collapsing World Trade Center, icon of American capitalist empire, circulated the world. Al Qaeda had effectively produced a symbolic attack, televised free of charge.

Fear hit the Strip. If the World Trade Center in New York symbolized the center of the United States-led global capitalism, then the Las Vegas Strip was an icon of American consumerist culture. The city and the gaming industry immediately realized that Las Vegas was a potential target. Most casinos hired anti-terrorist experts.[24] Already, the Strip had some of the most advanced surveillance technologies. It led Homeland Security to visit Las Vegas after 9/11, so it could learn from the facial and tracking technologies casinos deployed.

The response of locals as well as tourists to 9/11 on the Las Vegas Strip was significant. With its referent under siege, New York New York, the resort that so lavishly cannibalized New York's symbolism, took center stage on the Strip. Since the resort represented New York of the early twentieth century, there was no replica of the twin towers in its faux skyline, which would have caused a serious dilemma for casino management. However, New York New York's replica of the Statue of Liberty, the quintessential symbol of the American spirit, was spontaneously treated as a shrine. People placed personal items such as notes, flowers, flags, poems, pictures, firefighter helmets, police officer tokens, and T-shirts with handwritten notes in front of the statue. [See Image 2] Thousands of firefighters attending the International Association of Fire Fighters Convention marched up to strip to show their support. In honor of the victims, perhaps forced by people's spontaneous reverence, New York New York decided to build a permanent shrine honoring the victims in front of the resort.

While New York New York became a shrine, the Aladdin became a tomb. Its Arabian Nights theme had lost its allure overnight. In light of 9/11, people deliberately avoided the Aladdin. Barely two weeks after 9/11, the resort filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. The first resort built on the Strip in the new millennium, Aladdin had only been open for 13 months.

It must be said that the Aladdin also suffered design problems, such as a lack of convenient pedestrian and automobile access from the Strip. In addition, it had a history of financial trouble. Before it opened as the Aladdin in 1996, it had started but failed as Tally Ho. In 1979, some of its officials were convicted of being associated with the Detroit Mafia, after it was bought by a partnership, including entertainer Wayne Newton, that dissolved after two years. Different owners filed bankruptcies until Aladdin Gaming LLC, the company that was responsible for the latest version of Aladdin, bought the resort. A company with no track record, it imploded the Aladdin in 1998, only preserving the existing 7,000-seat performing arts center. Interestingly, the company decided to keep the name and the Arabian Nights theme: the Aladdin was the only resort to survive an implosion. [See Image 3] Initially, the company planned the new Aladdin as a partnership with Planet Hollywood. It would consist of two hotels: one completely owned by Aladdin gaming, the other in a 50% partnership with Planet Hollywood. However, the partnership was called off in 1998, when Planet Hollywood was about to file bankruptcy because it had expanded too aggressively. Finally, close to the opening date, Aladdin's bonds devalued to junk status, because of a lack of confidence in the project plus some financial difficulties on behalf of Aladdin Gaming. Competitor Park Place snapped up one-third of the bonds when they were low. They did not mind if Aladdin failed, which would enable them to take over the property.

Despite following the tested paradigm of a themed luxury resort with a large retail component, the new Aladdin could not escape its misfortune. [See Image 4] A total of $1.3 billion was spent on the almost completely new Aladdin, the first hotel on the Strip that had all of its 2,567 hotel rooms outfitted with an Internet connection. Its 500,000-square-foot, $300 million mall called Desert Passage, developed in partnership with TrizecHahn, was highly themed. It transported shoppers along "ancient trade routes" from North African settings to the Arabian Sea, all the way into a "Lost City", a mountainside village built of mud plaster, straw structures, and marked by ersatz erosion lines and seashells. [See Image 5] Yet with images of Bin Laden circulating the world – in a more authentic lost city hideout – few visitors were willing to shop in Aladdin.

For the gaming industry, the failure of the Aladdin signaled the end of theming. "The Aladdin Resort and Casino was the tipping point. It failed at lots of things, but its theme and architecture dealt the death blow to theming,"[25] said a designer who had previously designed some of the themed environments. It was representative of the general consensus on the Strip: theming was dead.

In 2007, Aladdin reopened as the Planet Hollywood Resort and Casino. In 2003, the U.S. bankruptcy court had accepted a $637 million bid of a partnership that ironically included Robert Earl, founder of the Planet Hollywood chain. He had maintained control of the company that was now much smaller. Endorsed by its celebrity "owners" Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis, Planet Hollywood catered to the young Hollywood crowd. Except for some parts from the Desert Passage, the remodeled property shed its Arabian theme entirely, decked out with a new four-story undulating base with a LED-lit color changing circular pattern, topped by video screens – the video screen represented the latest metamorphosis of the sign, which now mimicked the development of television. [See Image 6] In retrospect, it was Aladdin's failure that left a mark on the Strip, not its

opening. Not only did the fall of Aladdin signal the end of theming; when it was converted into Planet Hollywood, operated and owned by the global restaurant chain, it heralded a new global phase of the Strip, in which large global companies redefined the Strip.

5.1.2 High-Brow Architecture, Low-Brow Content

The same year that Aladdin failed, the Guggenheim opened in the Venetian and the Palms opened a few blocks off the Las Vegas Strip. Both developments were major indicators of where the Strip was headed in the new millennium. With the theming paradigm obsolete, the Strip was looking for a new model. The Guggenheim's high design and elite architects, and the Palms' new young and wealthy demographic, prefigured the new metamorphosis of the Strip. At the same time, at the forefront of the architectural evolution lied an unlikely innovator: the nightclub operator, which successfully managed to marry their young clientele with hip and contemporary design. Finally, the re-branding of Treasure Island into T.I., and the opening of the sleek The Hotel, cemented the new branding paradigm.

Adelson had brought the Guggenheim brand to the Strip, perhaps envying his rival Wynn's personal art collection that had once been on display in the Bellagio. A few weeks after 9/11, while the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art held the "Masterworks of the Philips Collection", the Guggenheim Foundation opened two galleries in the Venetian. Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, winner of the prestigious Pritzker Prize, had designed both of them. The "Big Box", the biggest gallery, looked like a seven-story hangar because of its untreated Corten steel finishes, and the industrial bridge hanging from the ceiling. The smaller gallery, the "Jewelry Box", was more a more conventional museum space, showing a collection from the State Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg.

It was quite ironic that one of the most revered architects had designed an interior of a museum inside a casino that the architectural establishment considered a cheap rip-off of Venice. The irony did not stop there. The first Guggenheim Las Vegas exhibit, "Art of the Motorcycle" – perhaps reminiscent of Wolfe's appreciation of the custom car and bike culture, which had led him to Las Vegas – was designed by Frank Gehry, another Pritzker Prize-winner, and designer of the famed Guggenheim museum in Bilbao. Yet, the teaming up of Koolhaas and Gehry, under the flag of the Guggenheim, was telling of the new direction the Strip was headed. [See Image 7] Gradually, kitsch was being replaced by high-end cultural brands. The opening of the Guggenheim lent the cultural prestige of the global museum chain and the celebrity architects to the Strip.

However, it was far from a smooth transition. Las Vegas still had a stigma attached to it that made architects and critics a little uneasy about "serious" art and architecture. "I worry about that kind of context," said Gehry to the *Los Angeles Times.* "There may be a way to do it, but the fear is that it would all just become another theme, whether you like it or not."[26] And within the cacophony of themes that was the Strip, Koolhaas' radical yet understated style appeared a rather bleak industrial theme, nowhere near as spectacular as the sinking ship of Treasure Island across the street.

Dave Hickey, art critic and professor at UNLV, feared that the meaning of art in the context of the Strip might depreciate to mere spectacle. “All of this is based on the presumption that art is a spectator sport, like a tractor pull,” Hickey said. “You’re not in the museum business anymore. You’re a carnival.”[27] By early 2003, it turned out Hickey was right. The Big Box opening exhibition was also the closing exhibition. First the Big Box, then the Jewelry Box was closed, since they were not as profitable as expected. The gallery needed about 4,000 but to sustain itself economically, but the actual figure was not even a fifth of the required visitors. But even though Koolhaas’ creation was discarded almost as soon as it popped up, the Guggenheim prefigured the celebrity architects about to define Las Vegas.

A few weeks after the opening of the Guggenheim, the 455-room Palms opened three blocks west of the Strip on West Flamingo Road. It catered to a young, hip, affluent crowd, termed by some the “MTV generation”. The Palms was after a very different demographic from the 1990s, although the Hard Rock in 1995 had a similar approach. With the growing competition of Disney, Six Flags, Sea World, and the cruise industry, the Strip needed another demographic to tap into. Competing for families was hard; plus, it turned out that catering to the young demographic was more profitable. Once again, a severe demographic shift led to a new identity of the Strip.

Jerde Partnership, the designers known for previous themed resorts, such as Treasure Island and the Mirage, designed an ultra-hip resort that was no longer explicitly themed. The new, wealthier, and younger demographic, in comparison to the baby boomers, favored modern design over themed architecture. The Palms included an Asian restaurant modeled after Buddha Bar in Paris. The owners, the Maloof family, who also owned the Sacramento Kings basketball team, used a celebrity marketing approach. In 2002, they demolished six hotel rooms for a “snazzy high-rise suite” to accommodate the MTV reality show the *Real World Las Vegas*, securing media exposure.[28] They later turned this suite into The Real World Suite™, cementing its relationship with the Real World brand. In 2004, it deployed a similar strategy with *Playboy Magazine.* Even though the Palms was not situated on the Strip, and thus could not rely on pedestrian passersby, such a strategy had made the resort very successful, and the resort expanded with the Palms Fantasy Tower in 2005. The media-savvy Maloof brothers, once again, strategically associated with known brands such as *Playboy Magazine*. The new addition included a record studio, in which Britney Spears recorded her sixth album, a tattoo parlor, which hosted the reality show *Inked*, and Playboy Club, mixing high-stake gambling, nightlife, and Playboy bunnies. One suite contained an actual basketball court, while another, the Hugh Hefner Sky Villa™, featured a rotating bed and an outdoor swimming pool sticking out of the building, for no less than $40,000 a night. [See Image 8]

Both the Guggenheim and the Palms set the tone of the new development of the Strip. High design had made its way to Las Vegas. But where the Guggenheim failed because of its high-brow content, the Palms, catering to a younger demographic, was successful. The future of the Strip was to marry high design with low-brow content. Architecture had always been a façade determining the cultural status of the Strip; this time, it was a means of distinction for a younger, more affluent, and brand-centric demographic.

An unlikely innovator managed to take the architectural revolution further, by providing their young clientele with contemporary interior design. The nightclub operator was an important factor in changing the new image of the Strip, increasingly responsible furnishing the design of their venues within resorts. Ever since the mid-1990s, the gaming industry had outsourced parts of the resort operation that it had traditionally operated itself, such as bars, nightclubs, and even pools. It did so to minimize risk, as well as to encourage a further specialization of services for a demographic it was not used to connecting to. Gaming corporations ended up doing core and shell, with individual operators leasing the space and reconfiguring resorts into hip entertainment destinations. A heavy battle between these operators for customers occurred; part of the fight was played out on the field of interior design. Particularly the nightclub operator made Las Vegas "cool" again, much like nightclub operator Billy Wilkerson had done when he opened the Flamingo almost six decades before.

Since the early 1990s, when the Rio opened Club Rio and the VooDoo Lounge, nightclubs started to play a larger role on the Strip. When the clubs proved to be a success, other nightclubs quickly followed suit. Mandalay Bay opened Rum Jungle, MGM Grand inaugurated Studio 54, Luxor the RA, the Palms had Rain, the Bellagio opened Light, and Treasure Island, Tangerine. With the increased competition of nightclubs in Las Vegas, specialized operators were better able to run the clubs than gaming companies. One of these operators was the Light Group, a self-proclaimed "lifestyle company." Brainchild of the nightlife mogul Andrew Sasson, a high-school dropout who worked his way to the top, the company relied on modern design, a celebrity clientele, and high-end bottle service. The Light Group started with Light in 2001, the nightclub in the Bellagio that pulled Las Vegas nightlife even further upscale. Designed in a minimalist style, it required a two-bottle minimum to each table, which after taxes and tips came to at least $1,000 or more, depending on whether or not it was accompanied with waitresses, sparklers, and a dedicated song. A database tracked every customer, bestowing on the host the knowledge of what people drank, where they sat, and who their cocktail waitress was. Even Steve Wynn, who liked to keep everything under strict personal control, came to the conclusion that he could not successfully operate the nightclubs in his new resort. He ceded control of the nightlife to the young operator Victor Drai: "They're realizing they need somebody to run the club; it's very different from the hotel business."[29]

By outsourcing the entertainment, corporations could circumvent the power of organized labor. Outside operators were not restricted by Culinary Union rules that tended to favor older, longtime workers for new jobs. They hired whoever they wanted; picking from a pool of women that tended to respond to modeling and casting jobs more than food and beverage positions. When the Light Group hired for Jet, for instance, a billboard cheekily asked "Saline or Silicone?" Older male bartenders were not considered and (unsuccessfully) filed complaints with the Nevada Equal Rights commission. [30] Even the Culinary Union did not object, knowing that the young workers brought tourists to the Strip, fueling the majority of the Union's 60,000 members, including maids and dishwashers. The nightlife industry became a major source of income on the Las Vegas Strip. In addition, it created new work, such as a demand for bouncers, publicists, and

club photographers, who fed off the nightclub buzz, while at the same time reproducing it.

After the introduction of nightclubs, operators further diversified the entertainment scene with “ultra-lounges” and “adult pools.” Tabu, the first ultra-lounge, a modern-looking lounge with a small dance floor, opened in the MGM Grand in 2003. Almost immediately afterwards, ultra-lounges popped up everywhere on the Strip: Ghostbar in the Palms, Risqué at Paris, Mist at Treasure Island, and Caramel at the Bellagio. They were accompanied with a wave of adult pools, a sealed-off area of the resort’s pool complex, managed by nightclub operators during daytime. The pools required a cover charge to enter and were open to people staying in other resorts as well. Rarely deeper than four feet – made for dipping, not swimming – they were embellished with the occasional fake beach. Ironically, many of the clientele drove many hours from areas with real beaches to experience the fake beaches at the Hard Rock, Flamingo, and Mandalay Bay. If there was one thing that the Strip knew best, it was how to make a simulacrum.

Besides diversifying the entertainment industry, the new operators changed the look of the Strip as well. They defined the design of the retail, restaurants, and nightclubs of the resorts, whereas the gaming company ended up doing only the core and shell of these commercial interiors. As a result, the resort functioned more or less as the structural carcass, filled in with different styles according to the taste of the operators who hired well-known interior designers such as the Japanese star Superpotato, Paris’s Philippe Starck, and New York’s Vicente Wolf. However, the gaming company still defined the design of the main interior spaces of the resort, such as the lobby, as they required holding all the different elements together. In the case of new resorts, the spaces designed by the operators were still built at the same time as the communal spaces defined by the resort. The operational and financing model functioned much like a magazine, in which the advertising, the interiors defined by individual companies, ended up paying for the editorial, the communal spaces.

Besides the nightclub operators, restaurant operators, many of them celebrity chefs, played an increasingly important role on the Strip as well. When Wolfgang Puck set up his restaurant in the Forum Shops in Caesars Palace, which became his biggest money-making restaurant, more celebrity chefs followed. [31] Initially they were afraid that being in Vegas would ruin their reputation; a decade later, the culinary scene on the Strip had drawn international recognition. MGM Grand had Emeril Lagasse and New York chef, Tom Colicchio; the Bellagio had Sirio Maccioni, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, and Michael Mina; Mandalay Bay hosted Hubert Keller, Alain Ducasse, and Rick Moonen; the Venetian and Palazzo combined had restaurants of Emeril Lagrasse, Wolfgang Puck, Thomas Keller, David Burke, and Mario Batali. Even Joel Robuchon, named “chef of the century” by Gault Millau, one of the most influential French restaurant guides, opened a restaurant in the MGM Grand, which debuted with three Michelin stars in 2007. But while the culinary brands were imported, the actual celebrity chefs were not. Most of them did not actually live in Las Vegas, and they typically visited their Las Vegas restaurant once a month to check up on things. Many chefs used their Las Vegas restaurants to finance their restaurants back home, in New York or Los Angeles, or to extend their personal brand even further globally. The schism between the home and the

restaurants of the chefs revealed there was a gap between the brand of the Strip and the actual Strip; branding cannot be completely removed from other things that make people like a city.

Finally, two major events in 2003 further cemented the new paradigm in exchange of theming: the re-branding of Treasure Island into 'T.I." and the opening of "The Hotel". One decade after its opening, Treasure Island, one of the most heavily themed and family-oriented casinos on the Strip, was being rebranded into T.I. The enigmatic skull and crossbones sign made way for a new modern sign spelling the acronym in letters that doubled as LCD screens. [See Images 9 and 10] The huge arcade with games for children was drastically downsized, making room for an adult-friendly hot tub, a nightclub, and an "ultra-lounge". Its signature pirate show, "The Battle of Buccaneer Bay", had been rebranded into the more sexy "Sirens of T.I.". Scarcely dressed sirens replaced the stuffy naval officers, using dancing, singing, and a sporadic whip to conquer the buccaneers' hearts. The battle of ships had been turned into a battle of the sexes, and swordfights had become acts of seduction, in what T.I. called a "sensual modern interpretation" of the Battle of Buccaneer Bay.[32]

Judging from the metamorphosis of the new T.I., it was clear that MGM Mirage's family days were over. "We're not a national park, we're not Disneyland, we're not a great historic site. We hired an outside PR firm that came up with the Vegas-for-families idea. Those guys are gone. There was some confusion in the market, that's for sure. This isn't the place to bring your kids,"[33] said Alan Feldman, spokesman for MGM Mirage, in what appeared to be an acute case of amnesia. The new demographic shift gradually edged out the family side of Las Vegas. The uses of Las Vegas as a theme park for children seemed to be incompatible with the Strip as a party place for young people. It is hard to be a hip nightlife destination, with party revelers running into strollers. Thus, strollers were banned from many resorts – like the skull and crossbones, they were one of the immediate casualties of the shift. [See Image 11]

The company also rebranded their Mirage, the once so popular resort. The Mirage relied to large extent on Siegfried and Roy for establishing its identity, but tragically lost its main act after Roy got mauled by his tiger in 2003. The drama unfolded in front of 1,500 people, many of whom thought it was part of the show. The incident signaled the end of the Siegfried and Roy show, as well as the family-friendly side of the resort that it had symbolized. In 2005, the resort would open Jet, a nightclub with walls and ceilings made out of video screens, and in 2007, Bare, an "adult pool", set up like a nightclub, complete with a DJ, cocktails, bouncers, and a velvet rope; although the main attraction was "European- style" sunbathing: women were allowed to take off their tops. Like the Parisian-style shows before, Europe served as an exotic excuse for nudity.

At the end of 2003, Mandalay Bay opened its new $230 million addition, the Hotel. The 43-story tower with 1,128 suites was "sleek in design and kitsch free", according to *USA Today*. Patrick Jouin designed Mix restaurant for celebrity chef Alain Ducasse, plus the Mix Lounge, a top-floor bar with an ultramodern coral-like ceiling. [See Image 12] Both venues would feature extensively in interior design books, representing the new Las Vegas. In addition, the ground floor of the hotel was decorated with works of Andy

Warhol, Richard Rauschenberg, and Arturo Herra. Most importantly, the Hotel did not have a theme. "We believe that style is going to be the next phase of Las Vegas," said Mandalay Resort's Group director of marketing. "We think it's going to go away from themes."[34]

However, it seemed that Las Vegas developers treated the brand as a new theme: the theme of high-end modernism. A branded property was often nothing more than a variation of a high-end modernist style. In addition, the same companies that had once designed the highly themed environments on the Strip had designed the new branded casinos. Dougall Design, for instance, the company that did the themed Belle Epoque Monte Carlo and the Roman Forum Shops, now designed the ultra-modern the Hotel, and would continue to design the next wave of branded resorts: the Cosmopolitan, Planet Hollywood, and Echelon Palace. More than a radical change in design philosophy, a change in theme seemed likely. Branded architecture was a new theme yet to be copied – globally, and by the same company.

5.1.3 What Happens in Vegas™

As icing on the cake, the city defined a slogan that further cemented the new PG-rating of the Strip, wiping out the family image once and for all. The year the sexy sirens of T.I. replaced the stodgy naval officers also witnessed the rise of the new city slogan, which made the rebranding of Las Vegas into a hip and sensual destination complete.

R&R advertising had been in charge of marketing the city since the 1980s, commissioned by the Las Vegas Visitors and Convention Authority. Billy Vassiliadis – better known as "Billy V", president and majority owner of R&R advertising, and according to *New York Times* the most powerful unelected official in Nevada – envisioned a bold marketing move to overcome the family image. "Las Vegas being a family destination is absolutely terrible for us in terms of setting ourselves apart from the competition,"[35] he said.

R&R advertising faced a review for the account in 1999, and part of the pitch was to introduce a brand approach.[36] The intention was to *brand* Las Vegas, as a more effective way to get people to come to Las Vegas. Rather than showcasing various physical features of Las Vegas as a traditional marketing campaign would do, it would center on how Las Vegas could *transform* the consumer emotionally. "What was needed was a shift to a brand-driven approach that would define the Las Vegas experience based on an emotional connection between consumers and our destination," [37] said O'Keefe, leader of the LVCVA account for R&R Advertising.

The new city brand was defined as "Adult Freedom", an interpretation of freedom not based on civil liberties, but rather on promiscuity. "The new brand we're creating is one of freedom based on sensuality,"[38] said Oscar Goodman, Las Vegas mayor and chairman of the LVCVA board of directors. The campaign's slogan, "What Happens Here Stays Here," was taken from the salesman's mantra "What happens on the road, stays on the road."[39] With only one multisyllabic word, the slogan was unparalleled in both success and controversy. "What Happens Here Stays Here" placed Las Vegas outside of the rules of normalcy and causality, in order to create a space for people to behave in ways they would not otherwise. "So now Vegas has reinvented itself again, returning to vice but

sanitizing it by creating the biggest, nicest place to sin ever imagined, a Sodom and Gomorrah without the guilt,"[40] wrote Joel Stein.

The slogan's controversy ensured its media success. When the NFL declined to air the ad during the Super Bowl, dozens of national news outlets caught the story, televising the commercials for free. From there, the slogan would continue to become a national media hype. Ben Affleck, on *Saturday Night Live*, adjusted the line for a sketch into "What Happens in Thailand, Stays in Thailand"; First Lady Laura Bush, when Jay Leno asked on the *Tonight Show* if she had attended the Chippendales, said "Jay, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas"; Billy Crystal ended the 2004 Oscar ceremony with: "Remember, what happens at the Oscars, stays at the Oscars." The slogan even appeared as the puzzle on the *Wheel of Fortune*, signaling its "official" entry into the colloquial lexicon. It quickly evolved into "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," and it now even suffices to say the first four words, after which people will inevitably fill in the gap. So it became the title and theme of the film *What Happens in Vegas* (2008), with Cameron Diaz and Ashton Kutcher. [See Image 13] It happily cashed in on the newly constructed Vegas cliché of promiscuity, telling the story of two strangers who married another after one night of debauchery.

As a result of its success, the campaign became a paradigm in city marketing. *The New York Times* called it "a stroke of marketing genius", and *Advertising Age* referred to "a cultural phenomenon". Ralenkotter and Vassiliadis received *Brandweek* magazine's *Grand Marketer of the Year*, the brand marketing industry's number one award, as well as earning a five-year $320 million extension of the LVCVA account.[41] In 2006, the brand of Las Vegas was the number two brand, behind Google,[42] with an unaided awareness of the slogan that was regularly over 85%.[43] It appeared that the success of Las Vegas was partly responsible for the boom in cities that are trying to brand themselves in order to attract tourism. A survey by Taglineguru, in 2005, concluded that around 80% of cities over 25,000 people are actively trying to come up with a slogan or motto. "What Happens Here Stays Here" came out as the number one out of 350 selected city slogans in the United States.

The brand's success came with commensurate controversies and contradictions. In 2007, the LVCVA was involved in six court cases and had already spent more than $732,123 in trademark disputes.[44] Many businesses were "abusing" the Las Vegas brand. The Palms sold clothes with the text "What Happens at the Palms Never Happened," and Las Vegas Hilton filed for "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas" to be used on its slot machines,[45] the same slogan Dorothy Tovar had put on clothes, including underwear. She beat the LVCVA in filing for the trademark and received both state and federal trademark approval for use of the slogan in 2003. The LVCVA sued Tovar and won the case, despite Tovar's argument that the slogan was in the common vernacular.[46] By that time, the authority had spent already about $115 million in creating and promoting the slogan. Goodman did not see the necessity of any further legal disputes. Besides highlighting that the extra advertising "doesn't hurt," he pointed to a practical reason. "I don't want to be monitoring underwear for the next several years,"[47] he said.

Some critiqued on how little of the tax money that Las Vegas generated was spent on marketing. By 2008, the total resources of the room-tax-funded Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority exceeded $300 million. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority was initially called the Clark County Fair and Recreation Board until it was renamed in 1967. Its original purpose was to support recreational activities for locals, such as the construction of local parks.[48] Instead, the tax money was used to complete the construction of the new PG-rating of the Strip.

The image of the campaign was another topic of controversy. One of the local churches posted "What happens in Vegas, God knows about" on their billboard. It struck a theme remarkably similar to a cartoon that featured in the July 4 2005 *The New Yorker*. "*He* knows what you did in Las Vegas," heads the cartoon, depicting a preacher to an uneasy man leaving church: only a divine creature exempted the slogan. [See Image 14] Former Las Vegas mayor Jan Jones openly criticized the implied message as well, fearing that the city might become recognized "as a place where people come to cheat and steal."[49] To the *New York Times* she complained: "A reporter asked me recently, 'how did I make the transition from dancer to mayor?'"[50] Dr. Hausbeck, associate professor in sociology at UNLV, commented on how the brand stigmatized local women. "This is a world of women, and the lines and categories between sex and suburbs, bad girls and good girls, are endlessly blurred," she said. Linking the case of Las Vegas to a larger cultural trend, she argued that the "pornographication of everyday life that we see across the country just forces Vegas – Sin City – to keep its reputation going … To sort of take that extra step, by being a little racier, more extreme." Las Vegas, attempting to survive in the interurban competition, was forced in a race to the bottom – literally.

The city had trouble managing the contradiction that although it marketed itself implicitly as a sex destination, it was not so *in reality*. The slogan was a mere tease as to attract some, but not explicit enough to alienate others. When the Hard Rock Hotel put up billboards that elaborated the new brand too overtly, they were taken down. They featured a naked woman lying down on a blackjack table, and the text, "There's always a temptation to cheat." The Hard Rock had to pay $300,000 to settle a complaint that it had damaged the state's image. It was a difficult balancing act for both corporations and the city to ride the fine line of sexualizing space without offending anyone or breaking any rules.

Moreover, since prostitution is illegal in Clark County, the police and casino security endlessly tried to get rid of "smut peddlers": workers dressed in bright yellow vests handing out fliers with scantily dressed women – including "bored housewives" and "barely legal Asian girls" – and their phone numbers on the Las Vegas Strip. Only rural counties in Nevada had legalized prostitution, and they were at least half an hour away from Las Vegas. Therefore, in Las Vegas all sex-related business had taken an informal shape. Prostitutes in Las Vegas were "dancers," that got most of their business through the handing out of flyers by "smut peddlers". The city even passed an anti-handbill ordinance, but with help of the American Civil Liberties Union, and after a decade-long court battle, a federal judge declared the bill unconstitutional in 2007, claiming it violated the first amendment of free speech.[51]

Finally, even though the Gaming Control Board did not allow professional stripping in gaming establishments, the Strip was being "sexified". The authorities only managed to close down the Sapphire Pool at the Rio in 2009, which encouraged strippers of the Sapphire Gentlemen's Club to hang out by the pool. Meanwhile, Cirque du Soleil opened its Zumanity show in New York New York, for 18 and older, including nude performers and same-sex escapades. MGM Grand's new show, which had closed its theme park and childcare activity center, opened a copy of Paris' erotic Crazy Horse Cabaret. At the same time, stripper poles had been mushrooming all over the Strip, to be found in hotel rooms, nightclubs, and even in gaming areas. As a result of the new city slogan and the barely legal casino-strip club cross-fertilizations, the image of the Strip was radically different from only a decade previously.

As a result of the Strip's new image, in 2004, about a decade after it appeared as "Las Vegas USA", the Strip again featured on the cover of *Times Magazine*. [See Image 15] No longer depicted as a family-oriented Disneyland, it highlighted Las Vegas as a vibrant nightlife destination that was "hotter than ever".[52] The article, "The Strip Is Back!" claimed that Las Vegas had returned to vice through a process of "sexification". Similarly, *The New York Times*, in "After Nice, a Return to Vice", argued that Las Vegas had returned to its "deliriously seamy roots".[53] The days of the topless Minsky's Follies and the "hedonistic glamour" of the Rat Pack were back with a vengeance, undoing Las Vegas' previous family image. Not coincidentally, only two years earlier, a remake of the Rat Pack's *Ocean's Eleven* had come out, featuring George Clooney and Brad Pitt. Popular television shows such as "Las Vegas", a NBC drama series on the work and sex lives of a fictional casino's staff, and the Fox show "The Casino", set at the Golden Nugget, broadcasted the new image of Las Vegas. Las Vegas was "hip" and "cool" again, having realized there was more money to be made going back to its sinful roots.

Finally, as a result of the joint efforts of city promoters and corporations, the Las Vegas Strip had managed to create, and promote, a lifestyle that was more in line with that of bankers, who directed new unprecedented flows of capital to the Strip, funding the fourth building boom.

5.1.4 The Global Model

After the PG-rating of Las Vegas had solidified, a wave of new resort construction followed. Wall Street bankers took a liking to the new image of Las Vegas that was more in line with their lifestyle, and once again, redirected capital to the Strip, much of it from the Middle East. The architecture of the new generation of resorts was very different than that of the 1990s. Resorts were no longer explicitly themed, but were designed in a sleek modern style, some by famous architects. In addition, with gaming corporations expanding globally, resorts were no longer designed on an individual basis, but rather as *brands.* The notion was that people who had visited a specific brand in one place would be inclined to visit it in another.

The first megaresort to open in the wave of new resort construction on the Strip was the Wynn in 2005, followed by the Palazzo in 2007, Encore in 2008, and Project City Center in 2009. Whereas during the nineties the typical height of new resorts on average about

35 stories, the resorts in the new millennium had about 50 stories each. Rooms were also more luxurious; most were suites. Younger and wealthier visitors filled up the new resorts, reeled in by low-cost carrier airlines that offered cheap airfares thanks to innovations in the airline industry such as online booking.

The resort that initiated the wave of new resort construction was once again from the hand of Steve Wynn. Wynn, one of the main players behind the Disneyfication of the Strip, now deliberately moved away from Disney. His new resort set the tone for new resorts in terms of being bigger, more luxurious, internalized, mirror clad, with an interior that had a slight touch of avant-garde. More importantly, the design was to be replicated on the Strip, as well as globally.

Wynn's new property was also his only one. Kirk Kerkorian had taken over Wynn's empire, Mirage Corporation, in 2000. When stocks fell because of Wall Street's concern about declining profits as well as the legalization of gambling in Indian reservations in California, Kerkorian made a bid on the company. Mirage Corporation shareholders decided to take MGM's offer, so Wynn, allegedly reluctantly, was forced to sell. [54] Kerkorian managed to take over Wynn's properties for $6.7 billion, the biggest takeover on the Strip so far. Kerkorian's MGM merged with Mirage Resorts to become MGM Mirage, the largest operator on the strip. After Wynn sold his empire, he was landless for the first time in a long time on the Strip. Nonetheless, he parted from Mirage with about $600 million.

Within a month, Wynn bought the site of the Desert Inn and the golf course for $270 million. Struggling to find enough private investors to build the new property, he unenthusiastically went public with his new company, Wynn Resorts, in 2002. The selling of stock enabled Wynn to build a $2.7 billion resort, the most expensive resort built at the time. The 2,700-room resort had the highest per-room cost at $1 million, almost twice as expensive as the Bellagio. The resort took two years to design and three years to build. It included two theaters, two ballrooms, a 38,000-square-foot spa and fitness center with 45 treatment rooms, and five swimming pools. Even standard rooms had flat-screen televisions in the bedroom and bathroom, 320-thread-count European linen, and electronically controlled curtains over floor-to-ceiling windows. They cost more than $300 a night.

Las Vegas resorts had difficulty managing the contradiction of being an exclusive brand on one hand, while mass producing the brand experience on the other. A major innovation in the resort was the horizontal division between standard rooms and luxury suites. Normally, suites were situated on top of the regular rooms. In Wynn's new resort, they were separated horizontally: two-thirds of one floor was dedicated to the standard hotel rooms, one-third to the suites. Each part had a separate core, enabling better segregation throughout the resort. The suite tower had its own registration, porte-cochere, and swimming pool, and was closer to the fine dining restaurants. From the outside, this internal separation was invisible. The main goal was to shorten distances for guests, in order to provide a more boutique hotel experience.

The resort was a powerhouse of high-end brands and designers. Behind the 2,700-room hotel tower was an 18-hole golf course designed by the renowned golf course designer Tom Fazio. Modeled after a famed course in North Carolina, it had over 100,000 shrubs, 4,600 feet of streams, and a 37-foot waterfall. Inside the resort were 22 restaurants; many of them were designed by famous interior designers, such as Jeffrey Beers, Yabu Pushelberg, Jacques Garcia, Vicente Wolf, David Ling, Robin Kramer, Ed Soto, and Naomi Leff. A total of 31 boutiques, high fashion and design stores, such as Oscar de la Renta, Chanel, Dior, Cartier, Gaultier, Graff Jewelers, Louis Vuitton, and Manolo Blahnik, added to the mix. In addition, the resort had a Ferrari-Maserati car dealership to which Wynn charged admission to enter. [See Image 16] It turned out more successful than a Wynn art gallery with Steve Wynn's personal art collection, which was closed one year later because of poor ticket sales. It was replaced with a Rolex watch shop.

The new resort was supposed to be called *Le Reve*, French for "the dream", after the 1934 Picasso that Wynn owned, who liked to point to a hidden phallic figure in his favorite painting. However, the name was shot down by Republican pollster Frank Luntz, when he found that most people in his focus groups could not pronounce the word or knew what it meant. It turned out that if the resort took the name of Wynn, hotel rooms would be worth more an $80 extra a night. "I call it the Wynn 'extra.' People are willing to pay more for him,"[55] Luntz said. Therefore, the resort would be branded after Wynn. As a result, Wynn's persona and resort converged even more than before. The new resort was called the Wynn.

Wynn lived on the property, in one of the villas Wynn developed for high-rollers – who were courted with special salons, private entrances, and separate gaming areas, and were flown in with Wynn's private jets. Wynn's proximity to the resort came in useful since he was intimately involved with the building of his resort. He, as well as his former wife Elaine, signed off on nearly every design detail. Some suggest that Wynn's obsession over detail in his resort mimicked his obsession with the making of his own body – rumor has it Wynn is not shy from aesthetic procedures such as bronzing, hair treatment, and plastic surgery. But, in a cruel irony, Wynn was losing his eyesight. He suffered from the degenerative eye disease, retinitis pigmentosa, which limited his peripheral vision as well as his interaction with proximate objects. He likened it to looking through a tube, while the perimeter was getting smaller. He often leaned on people to guide him through the casino. To the despair of some designers, Wynn kept being involved with the design of his resort, despite his diminishing eyesight. It caused a clash with former Cirque du Soleil director, Franco Dragone, who was asked to design a show for Wynn Las Vegas. Dragone attempted to avoid a clear and single narrative, an effort that went unappreciated by Wynn. "I don't want to have a story line that pulls us by the nose we don't see what's going on around," he said. "With his eyes, he can't see everything that's going on . . . My shows are the opposite of Steve. He can't see all that's going on onstage."[56] It might have been his limited eyesight, which caused him to pierce through his *Le Reve* as well. Explaining the painting to friends, while making grand gestures, his elbow pierced the painting, making a six-inch gap. Wynn was just about to sell the painting with a record profit of $90 million; because of the damage, the deal was off.

Wynn's name was pervasive throughout the resort. His signature became the logo of the casino, featuring prominently on the building in bright yellow shining letters, like the author's finishing autograph on his latest masterpiece. Wynn put a hundred-foot-tall sign on the Strip with a three-story blackboard "eraser" moving up and down the sign twenty-four hours a day, "erasing" the LCD screen. Inside the building, the Wynn logo was put on roulette tables, bottled water, and bed sheets. The Wynn was the first casino to have its own line of home furnishings, so that people could take home the design of the brand. The fact that Wynn put his name on the building became the main feature of the marketing campaign. A commercial for the resort featured in the precious advertising space of the 2005 Super Bowl. After the camera zoomed in on Wynn's shining autograph on top of the building, it panned up to a figure that stood on the roof: Steve Wynn. The only words spoken in the advertisement, "I'm Steve Wynn. And this is my new hotel. The only one, I have ever signed my name to." Not a single peek into the property was deemed necessary; Wynn's brand name alone was enough of a guarantee.

With Wynn being the brand, theming no longer fit the picture. "The idea of a theme? I had passed that," Wynn said to a reporter. "I didn't think that a themed hotel was the thing to do anymore … And besides, at this time of my life, I felt strongly that 'well, why would anybody want to build a replica? Why would you set out to build something not as good as the original?'"[57] And so Wynn asked his designers for a new approach, which allowed him to lay a claim on authenticity. Roger Thomas, vice-president of design of Wynn Resorts, called themed architecture "repli-tecture", an attempt to transport guests to different time and place. Wynn Las Vegas, on the other hand, was meant to elicit an emotional response on behalf of the customer. "Wynn is what we call 'evoca-tecture' – a signature place that has its own very particular sensibility. We designed the property so that it's the only place in the world that offers this particular set of emotions, so you want to return again and again," said Thomas. [58] Wynn relied on his own in-house team for the architecture and interior design; he imagined himself the starchitect. Whereas, only a decade before, Wynn had modeled himself after Walt Disney, at the time of the Wynn, he referred to the architect Renzo Piano. If Wynn had grown to be an original artist, the Picasso of casino developers, then a casino resort developed by the artist should be called a "Wynn".

Although the interior design team designed a building in which no clear theme could be distinguished, traces of theming were still there. Instead of taking a place as a theme, Surrealist aesthetics had been co-opted. Thomas described 18 large, upside-down hanging parasols that moved up, down, and turned around, as a "a dreamlike ballet", inspired by René Magritte's Surrealist paintings of floating men and umbrellas. Moreover, French interior decorator Jacques Garcia designed some of the hotel's signature carpets, combining protozoan patterns of sea-life-like creatures. Of all spaces, the Lake of Dreams was most surreal. Like the Bellagio fountains, it was meant as the main eye catcher of the resort. Because it bothered Wynn that his Bellagio fountains could be seen by nonpaying guests on the street, the Lake of Dreams could only be seen from inside the resort's restaurants and lounges. Designed by Wet, it had a three-acre reflecting pool with 4,400 color-changing and moving LED's that effectively transformed the lake into a giant television screen, emitting psychedelic swirls of blue, yellow, and purple. Air bubbles

from the bottom made the pool appear to be boiling. A waterfall on a stone wall doubled as a projection screen. To add to the surprise, a 27-foot fiberglass outline of a woman rose out of the water, in addition to mechanically operated sun and moon dolls and a 20-by 30-foot frog that appeared from the backdrop. Every fifteen minutes, video, music, light, water, and animatronics were mixed in a show that was more on the tacky than the surreal side. [See Image 17]

The outside of the building was rather disappointing. Even though the building measured 617 feet and was the tallest on the Strip – until Trump built his namesake tower – the façade did not impress. An architecture critic from *The Los Angeles Times* described the copper- and chocolate-colored, crescent-shaped building a "glitch in the glitz", a "determinedly banal architectural skin", resembling a "mid-rise office tower in Houston, circa 1983."[59] Wynn thought otherwise, and, in line with the brand, drove a customized $300,000 Maybach, by Daimler Chrysler – chocolate-colored, obviously.

Besides the disappointing architectural envelope, the Wynn had a rather understated urban spectacle. Towering 140 feet above the Strip, covered by 1,500 pine, agustum, purple leaf plum, and pistachio trees, was a $200 million artificial mountain. Yet, for the seasoned Strip reveler, the sight of the mountain paled in comparison to the neighboring spectacles of the erupting volcano of the Mirage, the sinking ship of Treasure Island, and the musical fountains of the Bellagio. From the outside, the mountain seemed indifferent to passersby, as if it were merely a topographical incident that just happened to occur in front of the resort. The press release stated the reason for moving these 800,000 cubic yards of earth: "SECLUSION: The mountain, some 140-feet high, forms a natural barrier between The Strip and Wynn Las Vegas." The mountain separated the lake from the Strip, arranging an interior of five waterfalls and eight gardens that blended in with the adjacent restaurants, nightclubs, and lounges. It effectively shielded off the intrusion of the public sphere on the Strip, with its noise and traffic, in addition to blocking the sight of a giant metallic roof (part of a $1 billion remodeling) that hovered above the Fashion Show Mall across the road. [See Image 18]

Although the Wynn represented a further step in the evolution of casinos on the Strip; for the Strip, it was a clear step back: a return to the model of the internal megaresort. The Wynn did not give back to the urban context it is placed in; rather, it was inward oriented. As a result, the Strip had become a less exciting urban place. If urban spectacle was previously "democratic," for everyone to see, now it was made private, for those who were willing to buy into the Wynn brand.

Once the Wynn brand had been defined and designed, it was ready for replication in Las Vegas, plus to be exported globally. In 2002, Wynn Macau was announced. The dual Macau-Las Vegas base of Wynn mutually co-constituted the design. Although most Las Vegas resorts hired Feng Shui masters, Wynn Las Vegas was even more Asian-friendly than usual. Red tones pervaded the interior, since red stands for happiness and energy; the elevator skipped floors 40 to 49 because the number four sounds like death in Chinese; and plenty of Asian restaurants were situated within a short walking distance from the

elevator to accommodate Asian guests. Resorts were no longer designed on a strictly individual basis; they were considered globally.

Wynn Macau opened in 2006. It appeared a miniature version of the Las Vegas model; since it had only 600 rooms it was a lot smaller. Most of the resorts in downtown Macau had few rooms, because they were mainly day trip destinations for Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong visitors, who did not stay overnight. Instead of an artificial mountain, a musical colored fountain marked the front; in Macau Wynn still needed to build a reputation.

In 2008, the $2.3 billion Encore opened next to the Wynn. From the outside, the 53-story tower looked exactly like the Wynn. [See Image 19] Once again, Wynn had copied the base model, with only slight variations. Encore was a different brand within the Wynn family, which catered to a slightly younger and more upscale crowd. The resort was financed from existing credit and bond agreements and $300 million in corporate cash. The 2,034-room Encore had a large 40,000-square-foot nightclub called XS, a Switch restaurant that changed décor every hour, and a Botero-branded steakhouse, after the famous Colombian artist, featuring two Botero sculptures. [See Image 20] Now even contemporary artists had lent themselves to branding a space on the Strip.

In 2010, Encore was replicated in Macau, again as a sister tower to the Wynn. An all-suite resort of 414 rooms, it looked like a miniature version of Encore, except for its white frame, which gave it a more luxurious feel amid mirror-clad buildings. The global export of Wynn's brand had paid off; in 2010, he generated 65% of his company's revenue in Asia. Backed by this knowledge, it led him to threaten to move his company headquarters to the Asian gambling city.[60]

Wynn Resorts was not the only native Las Vegas corporation that had become global. MGM Mirage rebranded its name to MGM Resorts International in 2010, looking into more expansion in Asia, particularly Vietnam. It had already opened the MGM Grand Macau in 2007. The 600 rooms were divided over three colored slabs in a 35-story building, designed in a contemporary style. That same year the company managed to real in a $5.1 billion investment from Dubai World, to fund another property in Las Vegas and to diversify its holdings. At the same time, Dubai based Zabeel Investment had bought a half-interest in the Light Group, the nightlife and restaurant operator that partnered with MGM Grand. The Dubai companies were interested in getting involved so that they could use Las Vegas' resort industry experience, as well as export the Las Vegas brands back to Dubai, where a Las Vegas-style Strip was in the works.

In 2009, Adelson described Las Vegas Sands as "an Asian company with a presence in Las Vegas and the U.S."[61] At the end of 2009, Asia accounted for 73% of Sands revenue. [62] A large part of this revenue came from their Venetian Macau, opened on Macau's Cotai Strip in 2007. Las Vegas Sands already had a small presence in Macau when it opened Sands Macau in 2004, a 51 suite gold Mirror clad casino. The Venetian was a full-fledged resort, however. A 40-story building, it had 3000 suites, in order to attract the multi-night visitor. It also brought a Cirque du Soleil show to Macau.

However, the Las Vegas Sands managed to strengthen its presence in Las Vegas as well when it opened Palazzo in 2007, the second major tower within the Venetian complex, emblematic of the trend of building resorts in pairs, like Wynn and Encore. Different from the resorts that were paired in the nineties, such as Treasure Island and the Mirage, the new pairs were more integrated. The 50-story, 3,025 suite-towers turned the joint Palazzo and Venetian in the largest resort complex in world of a total 7,074 rooms. Although it appealed to the same demographic the Venetian targeted, unlike the Venetian, the Palazzo had no clear theme. Even for Las Vegas Sands, the company that had built the most themed resort in Las Vegas, the architectural practice of theming had reached its limits on the Strip.

A large chunk of the $1.8 billion project was financed by the $766 million proceeds from the sale of the Grand Canal Shoppes and operating cash flow. A $975 million credit package, $135 million in equipment financing, and a $250 million construction loan financed the rest. The Palazzo was the first resort on the Strip to have an underground parking garage. Moreover, the Palazzo was the first in a new line of resorts that adopted the LEED green building standard, so it could associate itself with the sustainability brand. Ironically, a casino complex situated in the dry inhabitable desert, the Palazzo, had become the biggest “green” Silver LEED certified building in the world – a fact that tells us more about LEED than about the Palazzo.

Whereas the Palazzo did not have a clear theme, the $2.4 billion Venetian Macau, which opened in the same year, was entirely modeled after the Venetian in Las Vegas. Once again, the Venetian replicated Venetian canals and a Campanile; many of the construction drawings that were used were the same. In other locales, it would have been a hard sell replicating the Venetian, yet the Sands had managed to export its brand of theming, the Venetian, to Macau. But, after all, Macau was a city that branded itself as “Asia’s Las Vegas”, and had a replica of the Strip, the “Cotai Strip”. Moreover, unlike Las Vegas, it did not have a Venice replica yet.

Singapore, on the contrary, did not allow Las Vegas Sands to plop down another themed Venetian, but let the famed Moshe Safdee design the sleek Marina Bay Sands in a more culturally accepted form to the Singaporean elite. Las Vegas thematic extremities had difficulty crossing over to places where themed buildings were not socially accepted. The highly themed architecture that had worked well in the context of the Las Vegas Strip might not go down as well in other places. The relatively unregulated nature of the Las Vegas Strip, due to its unincorporation, prevented it from being subject to aesthetic objections of city planners, beautification committees, or community groups. Corporations did as they pleased; capitalist competition, rather than planning theory, had shaped the Strip.

By commissioning a star architect for its $5.7 billion resort, Las Vegas Sands had solved a potential limit to the global export of brands. There is a “Catch 22” with global corporations exporting themed architecture: a publicly traded company is held accountable to stockholders to increase value, and to grow, but as more themed establishments are built the novelty wears off, and they are not high on the visitation list anymore. This had happened to Planet Hollywood and Hard Rock. It was an argument for

star architecture, where each venue could lay a claim on authenticity. Therefore, instead of Venetian canals, the Marina Bay Sands took the pool race to global proportions: it hovered a 450-foott infinity pool in a 1000-foott long sky park – the world's largest public cantilevered platform – above the 55-story resort.

5.1.5 Condo Craze

While corporations expanded globally, the Strip went through another building boom, partly because of the proliferation of a newcomer: the condominium complex. As stand-alone complexes first, condominium towers would eventually be integrated into the casino complex. This new development mechanism allowed for the further growth of resorts, effectively placing the financing of the high-rise towers on individuals who were happy to buy into the lifestyle of the Las Vegas brand. And although the stand-alone condominium high-rises appeared little different from Miami-style residential towers, as they were integrated into a new casino complex, resort developers aspired starchitecture.

The new development mechanism was eagerly adopted on the Strip, since it was increasingly expensive to build new resorts. First of all, land prices on the Strip had skyrocketed. Secondly, during the middle of the first decade of the new millennium, the average construction costs rose between 5 and 15 percent. A surge in construction activity in various parts of the United States, plus an increase in steel demand, mainly from China, in addition to the increased export of construction materials to international markets due to a weak dollar, had driven prices up. In 2004, prices for structural steel, used to great extent in gaming construction projects, shot up to 60%. Moreover, the price of oil had been rising exponentially, from $1.90 for a gallon of diesel in April 2005, to $3.16 a gallon that same year in December.[63] This put pressure on the costs of new construction, as well as on transportation costs for visitors to Las Vegas.

To counter the extra costs for new construction, resorts had gotten more creative with financing. The development was increasingly split up in different buildings financed by multiple partners. The mall, casino, and hotel, although part of the same complex, could each be financed and capitalized separately. By including condominiums into the casino complex, which allowed new construction to be financed by individual homeowners, resorts could expand without adding debt. The new financial construction would be legible in the architecture of the typical resort; the casino complex was subdivided into multiple hotel and condominium brands, each tower expressed differently, often designed by individual architects.

The arrival of condominium high-rises had radically changed the look of the Strip. Soaring land prices had made high-rise residential viable; plus, the easy access to cheap mortgages allowed more people to invest in Las Vegas. In addition, when Las Vegas had set itself as a high-end vacation destination, and Las Vegas as a lifestyle had become well known and desirable, condominium towers were a viable investment. They were stand-alone residential communities at first, but soon started to get integrated into the casino complex. Since these condos effectively placed the burden of financing hotel rooms on outside parties, they provided gaming companies with a new development mechanism that allowed for more expansion and densification.

It was no coincidence that the condominium developer that initiated the trend, Turnberry, was from South Florida. Turnberry recognized similarities between Las Vegas and Miami: both were resort vacation destinations that fed off large metropolitan areas; Miami had New York, Las Vegas had California. At the same time, both Florida and Nevada saw a growing retirement community. Miami had already jumped into the market of condominium towers, which functioned as second homes to frequent vacationers from out of town. But whereas Miami offered high-rises with sea views, Las Vegas' view of choice was the Strip. A view of the Strip had become a much-desired spectacle; a small peek enough to raise real estate prices.

The first luxury condominium high rises on the Strip were the four towers of the $600 million complex Turnberry Place. Situated on the site of the old Thunderbird building on Paradise Road, the first 38-story tower was finished by the end of 2000, with all of its 740 units sold out before the first spade had hit the ground. At the same time, developer Irwin Molasky finished the 20-story Park Towers at Hughes Center, another high-end residential community overlooking the Strip. When these properties proved successful, many developers followed suit. It caused a boom of high-end condominium construction on the Strip.

Hilton planned a time-share condo tower on the site of old El Rancho. Laurence Hallier developed the two 30-floor Panarama towers, which opened in 2006, one block off the Strip, with condos sold to celebrities, such as Pamela Anderson and Leonardo DiCaprio. [See Image 21] Donald Trump and partner New Frontier owner, Phil Ruffin, built the luxury condominium tower the Trump. It was situated one block off the Strip, right across from a new resort planned by Steve Wynn. Although neither Wynn nor Trump admitted to their rivalry, the $300 million Trump Tower, 620 feet high, was only 6 feet higher than Wynn's tower. Giant letters spelling Trump decorated the 24-carat gold gilded building that resembled a gaudy tombstone. [See Image 22]

The gaming industry had stepped into the condo business as well, since it provided them with a new mechanism to expand. By integrating condos into the casino complex, they could sell off a number of units before the actual opening of the resort and get a quicker return on investment, while reducing the total debt burden. Effectively, debt was traded for revenue. Moreover, with prices ranging from $350,000 for studio units to $1.5 million for high-end suites, in addition to a monthly Home Owners Association Fee that could get up to thousands of dollars, these condos were too expensive to use as permanent residences. Typically, they were used as second homes or just as investments. Therefore, they could be rented out as hotel rooms when the owners were not there. The resort acted as the on-site leasing agent, maintaining and leasing out the hybrid condo hotel room for the owner, who got a cut of the rents. This ingenious financial structure allowed resorts to build additional hotel rooms with somebody else paying for them: they were "free" extra units. New construction could thus be financed at no cost to the developer.

In 2007, MGM Grand expanded with the Signature at MGM Grand. It pioneered the incorporation of condos in gaming resorts with the Signature at MGM Grand. A partnership between MGM and Turnberry Associates developed the three 40-floor towers containing 1,728 units. The towers rose where the failed theme park of MGM Grand once

stood. It was telling of the new times on the Strip: the theme park was out and high-end condominiums were in. [See Image 23]

Eager to participate in the condo craze, gaming corporations and independent developers announced a wave of new mega-resorts that integrated high-rise residential towers. For instance, the Palms opened a 599-unit condo tower called Palms Place in 2008. [See Image 24] At the same time, 3700 Associates, a partnership led by New York City and Miami developer Bruce Eichner, and privately financed by Soros Fund Management, planned the $1.8 billion Cosmopolitan Resort and Casino. The Global Hyatt Corporation would operate the casino and the hotel, the Grand Hyatt Las Vegas. The project reached new levels of density with two 61-story towers containing 2,200 condos and 800 hotel rooms, 300,000 square feet of retail space and a 40,000-square-foot fitness center and spa, all on a parcel of just 8.5 acres next to the Jockey Club.

The project's name, Cosmopolitan, as well as its exterior façade designed by Miami architecture firm Arquitectonica, reflected the new trend on the Strip. The resort used its density and claim to originality to distinguish itself symbolically from the other resorts. "We will redefine the City's skyline with a vertical design that contrasts sharply with the horizontally developed, replicated cities and themed hotels that bracket Las Vegas Boulevard," [64] said Eichner. Instead, the project looked like it could have been situated in the financial district of any major global city in the world: London, Shanghai, or Manhattan. [See Image 25] "You could just as easily find this project in New York, Miami, or Hong Kong, for that matter. It's not something anyone has seen in Las Vegas," said David Friedman, president of 3700 Associates.[65] "To execute our vision for The Cosmopolitan, we've hand-picked industry leading designers and architects whose palette includes some of the foremost buildings, cityscapes, and lifestyle centers in the world,"[66] said Eichner.

Another new megaresort in the works was the $2.9 billion Fontainebleau developed by Turnberry Associates. Meant as a sister property to the Fontainebleau Resort in Miami, it had a 63-story tower with 3,889 rooms, including 1,018 condo units, in addition to 400,000 square feet of convention space, 180,000 square feet of retail space, and a 60,000-square-foot spa. Carlos Zapata designed a blue, glass-clad, curved tower, which would feature the work of star artists Ai Weiwei and James Turell. [See Image 26]

After imploding the 48-year-old Stardust, the resort that had once made Las Vegas affordable to the masses, Boyd Gaming Corporation started to build the exclusive $4 billion Echelon Palace. It planned to have four hotels totaling 5,300 rooms, including a 3,300-room Echelon Resort operated by Boyd, in addition to three boutique hotels operated by other companies: the 38-story 400-room Shangri-La, the 32-story, 600-room Delano, and the 30-story 1,000-room Mondrian. If the Stardust had once a unified façade that was meant to incorporate the different hotel wings, the different towers of the Echelon were designed to look slightly distinctive on purpose. No longer was a unifying aesthetic desirable. As resorts were getting bigger, distinctive architectural styles in one development allowed for the breaking down of the scale of the resort, making them look less gigantic. Echelon ensured the distinctiveness of the architecture by employing different architects: BLT Architects designed the first three plus the master plan, whereas

Oppenheim Architecture from Miami did Delano and Mondrian. At the same time, by commissioning multiple architects, individual hotel operators could distinguish their brands from each other. [See Image 27]

With all these new projects in the works, partly thanks to the new development mechanisms, the Strip neared the peak of the boom. An April 24, 2007 *New York Times* article, "In Las Vegas, Too Many Hotels Are Never Enough", described the euphoria that lived among resort developers. Even Wynn, who had witnessed all of the previous booms, was impressed with the scale of the latest boom. "This is the most outrageous, over-the-top expansion ever," he said. The Strip was dotted with construction sites, leading State Governor Kenny Quin to suggest that Nevada should have the crane as its "unofficial state bird".

Some termed this new phase of the Strip as the "Manhattinization" of Las Vegas. With people eager to invest in condos, Paul Murad even published the book *Manhattanizing Las Vegas: How to Profit from the Next Phase* in 2005, followed in 2008 by *Manhattanizing Las Vegas: How to Profit from the Second Phase of Vertical Growth*. However, the spectacle of urbanity on the Strip, enforced by dense starchitecture complexes, was unlike that of New York City. The careful observer might have noticed that many of the new developments were typical "ghost towers". Because most of the new growth was caused primarily by pure speculation, few people actually lived in the high rises, which were too expensive for middle class families. At night, these towers appeared almost pitch black, as a symbolic disruption in the Manhattan myth.

5.1.6 Strip Starchitects

The most ambitious project of the fourth building boom on the Strip was MGM Mirage's Project CityCenter. MGM Mirage tapped even deeper into the pool of architectural talent, the so-called "starchitects", by involving Rafael Vinoly, Norman Foster, Cesar Pelli, and Daniel Libeskind. Perhaps only Rockefeller Center in New York, a much-cited reference of CityCenter, preceded the unusual teaming of elite architects. The resort was emblematic of the trend in which architects with high-cultural backgrounds worked with mainstream developers on commercial architectures of shopping complexes, hotels, and even casinos. The starchitects of Project CityCenter managed to wrap the low-brow content of the resort facilities in a high-brow façade, lending the resort their cultural status. With the advent of the starchitects, the day when the undiscovered, unknown artists of the sign age had defined the architecture of the Strip seemed very distant.

With all the new projects happening on the Strip, MGM Mirage could not stay behind. Kerkorian had not built a new casino since MGM Grand. He had bought casinos, but not built a new one. In 2004, he acquired Mandalay Resort Group for $4.8 billion, turning MGM Mirage into the world's largest gaming company. Because of the merger, MGM Mirage now owned almost 50% of businesses on the Las Vegas Strip, including more than 36,000 hotel rooms. Only one month later, the Strip witnessed another gigantic merger when Harrah's Entertainment bought Caesars Entertainment for $9.25 billion. With Harrah's deal, MGM Mirage and Harrah's combined controlled about 70% of the

Strip.[67] The resort industry on the Las Vegas Strip had consolidated to the extent it turned into a true oligopoly.

Since MGM Mirage had become such a major player on the Strip, there were massive expectations for their new project; CityCenter was to take the new starchitecture paradigm to new heights. On the south end of the Strip, on the site of MGM Mirage's Boardwalk Hotel and Casino and the Bellagio employee parking lot, Kerkorian planned a new megaproject. Each of the three megaresorts the competition had opened recently, Wynn, Palazzo, and Encore, were situated in the center of the Strip. As a result, the focus of the Strip had shifted away from the south end, where most of MGM Mirage's properties were located. MGM hoped the new project would shift the center back towards the south.

The main visionary behind the project was Jim Murren, CFO of MGM Mirage. Although he came from Wall Street, he had a degree in urban planning and art history, and was more idealistic than his predecessors. He envisioned a real city within a city, and hired McKinsey & Company to investigate the economic feasibility of the project. However, their 231-page economic report suggested that building a real city would not financially be viable, since affordable housing for employees and office space for professionals such as doctors was not profitable enough.[68] Instead, Kerkorian was advised to build a mixed-use development containing three new hotels, 1,640 condo units, 250,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space, and a theatre, all on the 55-acre lot. Finally, the project settled its 18 million-square-foot program on a larger lot size of 66 acres, which gave it a 6.3 floor area ratio, about six times as dense as Paris Las Vegas. Its workforce alone, 12,000 people, constituted a miniature city.

Costing more than $8.6 billion, it was the most expensive privately funded development in the U.S. The financing of the project was made possible thanks to the incorporation of condominiums which could be pre-sold, in addition to a 50% partnership with Dubai World. Both parties gained from the partnership, as Dubai World wanted to gain experience in the resort industry, whereas MGM Mirage benefitted from the financial support plus Dubai World's clientele network, many of whom would be potential condominium owners. City center sales pavilions were set up throughout MGM Mirage's properties on the Strip, in addition to one in Dubai. Moreover, a 30,000-square-foot sales building was erected. No less than $24 million was spent on the temporary structure that attempted to sell the condominiums ranging from $500,000 to $12 million.[69]

Clark County was particularly supportive in realizing the project. It streamlined the permitting process for large projects by constituting a High Impact Projects team solely dealing with megaresorts. This small group of planners negotiated a development agreement that required the resort to build a fire station that would partly serve the community. But most of all, MGM Mirage benefitted thanks to a green building incentive passed by the Nevada legislature that would save CityCenter up to $900 million in tax breaks over its lifetime. [70] All the resort needed to do get this huge tax deduction was to become LEED-certified.

The highly ambitious project was to be an “urban resort destination”. Urbanity was the new fetish. “It has to be distinctive, and it has to be more urban and it has to feel contemporary,”[71] said Terry Lanni, chairman and chief executive of MGM Mirage, summing up the direction of resorts of the fourth building boom. "CityCenter bridges the vitality of Las Vegas with the experiences travelers seek when they visit great cities around the world, whether London, Hong Kong or San Francisco – spectacular architecture, culturally significant art, great public spaces, sophisticated hotels, unique restaurants and incredible amenities," [72] said Bobby Baldwin, president and CEO of CityCenter. But different from the urbanity of for instance New York New York, with its replica of the Manhattan skyline, located right next to CityCenter, the resort laid a claim on authenticity, devaluing the replica architecture. Original star architecture was the new fetish, which devalued the copycat. “CityCenter is not an imitation of anything, it’s got its own separate identity,”[73] said Baldwin.

The idea was that the starchitecture of CityCenter could transform the city, as much as its visitors. “Transformation. It can happen to cities. It can happen to skylines. It can happen... to you.” [74]It was the joint stardom of CityCenter’s architects, which could turn the project into a new center of gravity on the Strip. “Las Vegas has never had a center or a core,” said Lanni to *The New York Times*. But, “By having iconic architects of world-renowned fame, we believe we have an opportunity to make a place people accept as the center of Las Vegas.” By positing CityCenter as culturally and environmentally correct, the resort attempted to attract the elite. It was a radical difference from Las Vegas’ Sin City image. What was being hyped was not the casino, but the “World Class” architects, art, and green features of the project. It was assumed that this mix had transformative powers, building on the success the formula of starchitecture had elsewhere. "It is an evolutionary destination that aims to transform Las Vegas as a new symbol at its core, like the Guggenheim in Bilbao, the Pompidou in Paris or the SONY Center in Berlin," [75] said Baldwin. The advertising further glorified the transformative abilities of the new CityCenter brand:

> “Can a building be a piece of art? Yes, in the hands of a master. Can a city be a work of art? Yes, when all of its pieces come together superbly. Can a destination transform you? Yes, in ways that are hard to imagine until you actually experience it. In lass Vegas such a place is coming: CityCenter.”[76]

CityCenter aspired to be “a multi-faceted display of the world’s finest offerings,” containing “the most dramatic elements of every great metropolis in the world’s most dynamic city.”[77] Urban “public” spaces were considered to be an important ingredient of this mix. “Great pedestrian corridors, dynamic public spaces, authentic richness and diversity of experiences will evoke the energy of the world's most exciting places.” [78] In addition, contemporary art and architecture were the new attractions. Murren commissioned Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen, Frank Stella, Maya Lin, Henry Moore, and Nancy Rubins to design “public” art for the resort. Lin designed a silver cast sculpture of the Colorado River, Rubins a large piece consisting of canoes, and Oldenburg a typewriter/eraser. [See Images 28 and 29] Even though their art might have pointed at the irresponsible use of water and demolition of history, above all, high art functioned as the new status generator among casinos. Parallel to the CityCenter’s star art

and achitecture was its collection of best celebrity chefs. Jean-Philippe Maury, Masayoshi Takayama, Sirio Maccioni, Todd English, Shawn McClain, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Julian Serrano and Michael Mina made up a dense concentration of star cuisine. It was clear elite culture was the new fetish.

Even CityCenter "city planners" were chosen from well known planning firms. An invited competition for the master plan between three renowned architectural firms set off the project. Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut, and Kuhn Architects, famous for designing Manhattan's Battery Park, won, and they were commissioned to design the master plan of the resort. They laid out the resort in a complex of several towers, organized around an access lane that doubled as a boulevard. None of the towers took the typical Y-shape plan that had dominated the Strip a decade earlier. [See Image 30]

The ads for Aria, the core of CityCenter, provide more cues for the new image the resort wished to portray. A giant billboard along Highway 80, in the San Francisco Bay Area, featured the property. "When Was The Last Time You Said 'Amazing' and Meant It?" [See Image 31] Just an exterior rendering is shown. And video advertisements, depicting urban scenes with close ups of the architectural façade shimmering in the light, backed up by classical music with dissonant course, ends with "Words will fail you", after a full rendering of the building is shown.

The press release boasted the unprecedented combination of "striking architecture" and "sustainable design". In another video from CityCenter, Aria's architects featured prominently. Architect Fred Clarke, partner of Pelli Clarke Pelli architects, noted on his involvement on the Strip, "Las Vegas has always been one of the most exciting places for architects to study, but no big name design firm has ever done a building there per se." Cesar Pelli played a leading role in the video:

> "I am Cesar Pelli. I am an architect. I love designing buildings… CityCenter is such a prominent structure… It needs to be a very recognizable iconic form."

Although CityCenter claimed to be at the heart of a paradigm shift, the project was not as adventurous as it claimed to be. "We are really changing the paradigm and the dynamic of what Las Vegas and especially of what the Las Vegas Strip is," [79] said Sven Van Assche, vice president of the MGM Mirage Design Group. Yet, by selecting the corporate and conservative firm Gensler as the executive architect of the project, overseeing the team of starchitects that designed parts of the resort, MGM Mirage showed there were limits to its attempts to innovate. Moreover, the commissioned celebrity architects were not the most radical ones.

Daniel Libeskind, designer of the Jewish Museum in Berlin and winner of the competition for the new World Trade Center in New York, designed the 500,000-square-foot Crystal shopping complex. A large mahogany "tree house" type installation featured in the atrium of the David Rockwell-designed mall. Whereas the casino was placed all the way in the back of the resort, the mall featured prominently on the Strip. The mall's location and elaborate architecture were illustrative of how quickly retail had gained importance in the industrial mix of the casino complex. By designing the mall in jagged forms that had become his trademark style ever since he designed the Jewish Museum, he

effectively blended high culture with commercialism; the mall had the feeling of a museum. [See Image 32]

The 47-story Mandarin Oriental, designed by William Pedersen, contained some of the world most technologically advanced hotel rooms. Guests arriving in their rooms were greeted by the drapes opening, the lights automatically turning on, and the television displaying a customized message with the guest's name. A single remote control controlled lighting, room temperature, music, draperies, television and video systems, and even wake-up calls. Even though the five-star hotel aligned the Strip, in order to maintain an image of exclusivity, it isolated itself through a high-walled courtyard planted with bamboo trees.

Helmut Jahn designed the Veer Towers, two 37-story towers leaning in opposite directions. The yellow-clad twin towers were the most interesting architectural features of the resort. Rafael Vinoly designed the Vdara, breaking down the scale of the 57-floor tower into three different slabs. Cesar Pelli designed the main 4,000-room Aria. Above all, with its 61 stories of curved, mirror-clad façade, Aria resembled an office building. Perhaps, its most exciting aspect was that the conditioned air was more efficiently distributed through a base underneath the slot machines, rather than from the ceiling.

Finally, Pritzker Prize-winner Sir Norman Foster designed the Harmon. By naming the tower after Harmon Avenue, the road that intersected the project, the resort departed from the Las Vegas tradition of naming roads after resorts. For instance, San Francisco Avenue had been renamed into Sahara Avenue, Bond Road into Tropicana Avenue, and both the Desert Inn and the Flamingo had roads dedicated to them as well. Moreover, unlike other hotels, the lobby was not to be publicly accessible. "We don't want the shorts 'n' t-shirts brigade,"[80] said Sasson of the Light Group, which would operate the hotel.

A terrible fate loomed over CityCenter's gateway to the Las Vegas Strip. Because of a structural problem during construction – wrongly installed rebar – the Harmon tower was downsized from 49 to 28 stories. As a result, the tower looked like a short stub in comparison to the other tower giants, and its checkered blue façade looked like an oversized disco ball. Norman Foster's masterpiece had been cut in half. This case highlighted the difficulty architects faced when building on the Strip. The sharp deadlines demanded by the gaming industry forced architects to come up with schemes very quickly, and this led to dramatic construction errors. Moreover, the architects were often demoted to exterior decorators, since resort developers preferred to hire different designers for the interiors so as to create variety, rather than having a single architect dominate the entire design. Finally, because of the record speed and complexity of the project, the Project CityCenter recorded six deaths in 16 months on site. It led to a strike against the contractor Perini; the largest private development in the United States lay still.

The unusual involvement of the celebrity architects with the gaming industry got them some criticism. The time in which elite architects distanced themselves from mass consumerism had been long gone. Libeskind's role in design of the shopping mall on the Las Vegas Strip was typical. An architecture critic of *The Los Angeles Times* observed the sharp turn previously idealistic architects had made on the Strip: "Libeskind, as

a dedicated intellectual early in his career, argued for applying an architectural version of the approach to literary theory known as deconstruction to buildings, primarily in the form of ruptured façades and vertiginous interiors. Now he has delivered decon's angular angst -- or some faint echo of it -- to the heart of Las Vegas, as a hulking shell for Prada and Gucci boutiques."[81] When *The New York Times* asked Libeskind how he reconciled his idealism of the past with designing a luxury Las Vegas mall, he countered by claiming his project attempted "to give a world of simulacra something original and real."[82] He described his contribution as a "rich, urbane, cosmopolitan scheme, one you could find in New York or in Paris." Different from typical resorts, his mall connected to the sidewalk "the way buildings do in Manhattan", and let in natural light.

However, on the whole, Project CityCenter was less unique than it claimed to be. Like other resorts, the overriding logic of its fragmented master plan appeared to be based on disorientation, in order to keep customers inside. Even its dedicated monorail was nothing more than a rather overstated people mover between the Monte Carlo and Project CityCenter. Moreover, following resort tradition, a large access lane from the Strip leading to the porte-cochere divided the Strip sidewalk, cutting off pedestrians. It led to the six-lane traffic Harmon circle directing cars to the six towers, so immense that even the monorail could not cover up the true suburban nature of the resort.

Finally, in the context of the Las Vegas Strip, Project CityCenter looked dramatically out of place. It was much denser than other projects around it, which made it stand by itself in the middle of sprawl. The starchitects had no interest in reacting to the context of the Strip. "We are taking this as a clean slate,'" had said Mr. Pelli. "There is nothing much there you can refer to."[83] However, next to a copy of Venice, Paris, and early twentieth-century Manhattan, the resort seemed to have appropriated another theme: that of celebrity architecture, copied from global cities' business districts. Ironically, the only Las Vegas aspect was another Cirque du Soleil show: the Elvis Experience. If anything, Project CityCenter was, as an architecture critic of *The Los Angeles Times* suggested, a "fitting coda to the decade of celebrity architecture and overextended real-estate mania," and a "palace to the age of towering debt and easy credit." [84]

The project showed the limitations to the transformative effects of starchitecture. A cluster of buildings designed by starchitects did not make urbanity. Like New York New York had provided an image of urbanity, so had CityCenter; fundamentally, CityCenter was a dense version of a suburban type, with celebrity art and architecture as the new theme.

5.1.7 Brand Trouble

Near the end of the first decade of the new millennium, the Las Vegas Strip had reached a new pinnacle of excess. Multibillion dollar resorts, celebrity architecture, expensive art, high-end luxury brands, and even an artificial mountain now dotted the Strip. The Strip was more decadent than ever. New venues kept being rebranded, causing a journalist to observe that "an epidemic of this brand of rebranding is sweeping the city."[85] Light, after having existed for only six years, was rebranded into the even more luxurious Bank in 2007. The minimalist environment was done up with larger VIP areas, bordered by LED-

lit etched floral glass, and walls lined with bottles of Louis Roederer Cristal Champagne underneath a champagne-glass ceiling fixture. “Status is everything”, the club’s slogan, explained how it managed to charge astronomical markups: by selling symbolic privileges, produced by an army of bouncers, cocktail waitresses, and a maze of velvet ropes. [See Image 33]

The shift upscale seemed to go unaccompanied by signs of economic distress. Casinos on the Strip had managed to raise the average cost of a night’s stay from $96.92 in 2000, to $113.02 in 2004, to $125.38 in 2005,[86] while at the same time maintaining occupancy rates over 90%, much more than the 60% national average. In addition, the fortune lying at the end of the Strip had attracted many workers. Las Vegas had been the fastest growing city in the US for almost two decades. Thanks to cheap land, low taxes, and high service wages, it seemed to be the only place where low-educated people could still make a middle-class life, including the American ideal of a detached single-family home. Moreover, the majority of jobs in resorts were unionized, which is why some called Las Vegas “the last Detroit”. Hal Rothman, a local historian shared in the euphoria, claiming that “Las Vegas now melds fun, work, and wealth, showing a path toward the brightest vistas of the postindustrial world.” The city had gone “from pariah to paradigm”, a new example for other cities in the United States. Since it effectively participated in what has been coined the new “experience economy”,[87] Rothman saw Vegas as a “triumph of post-industrial capitalism”, and “the first city of the twenty-first century”. Pine and Gilmore also boasted Las Vegas for its leading role in the new economy. “Consider Las Vegas the experience capital of America. Virtually *everything* in Las Vegas is designed experience.” Yet, experience is a tough commodity to sell in a time of economic crisis, and the brand of Las Vegas as the last bastion of the American Dream was about to dissolve abruptly.

While most of the new architectural icons were still in scaffolds, the global financial recession of 2008 hit the Strip, presenting it with the biggest crisis that it had seen since its inception. The globalization of the gaming industry had also lead to increased risk, and universalized hazards that could now cross over from other places, pertinent to the “Risk Society”. [88] With a lack of market liquidity and the unavailability of high yield bonds, gaming corporations, most of them with highly overleveraged capital structures and a lack of protection, were in major financial trouble. Too much risk had been built in over the years. Moreover, the integration of condominiums in casino resorts turned out to be a major gamble. Consumers were defaulting on mortgages, and the prices of condominiums plummeted, specifically in the high-end sector. As fast as capital had caused the condo boom, it fled away to safer investments. The initial assumption that gaming was recession-proof turned out to be false, when fewer visitors came to the Strip because of less discretionary spending. Gaming revenue on the Strip in early 2009 was down 23% from the previous year. As a result, casinos stocks plummeted dramatically. By early 2009, MGM Mirage stock had fallen 94% compared to the previous year. Las Vegas Sands dropped 97%,[89] and was so close to bankruptcy that Adelson put in his private money to save the company. The Singaporean government had to step in to help finance the Sands casino under construction in Marina Bay. By February 2009, Adelson,

who was the third richest person in the world in 2007 and 2008, said he had lost 36.5 billion of his net worth that once was $40 billion. [90]

As a result of the crisis, the new building construction came to a sudden standstill. The Deutsche Bank had foreclosed the Cosmopolitan Resort and Casino, which had broken ground next to the Bellagio in 2005. Boyd halted construction on Echelon Palace for at least three years; its bare concrete carcass exposed to the elements and the tourist gaze. [See Image 34] Even Project CityCenter, MGM Mirage's new prize pony, was on the verge of bankruptcy. First, Dubai World tried to get out of the project, since MGM Mirage was missing payments, then the company was sued by CityCenter's condominium owners who wanted the condo prize to be readjusted to new market value. CityCenter offered a 30% discount and took a massive loss on the $2.6 billion that it planned to receive from the condo sales.[91] Moreover, CityCenter's opening was delayed by one year. MGM Mirage, in order to minimize its massive debt, was forced to sell Treasure Island for a meager amount of $775 million to Phil Ruffin. He managed to pay a bargain price of $225,000 a room where CityCenter's rooms cost $1.5 million.[92] The 70% finished Fontaineblue had declared bankruptcy as well, and it was snapped up by corporate raider Carl Icahn for the paltry amount of $150 million. Since the purchase price was about the same as the land price, he essentially got the construction on top of the land for free.

As quickly as resorts had jumped in the condo boom, they tried to undo the condo cash. St. Regis residences, the condominium tower project of the Venetian in partnership with Starwood Hotels, had been stalled. Most of the condominiums were turned into hotel rooms: Palms Place, the condominium tower of the Palms, essentially got converted into a hotel tower; Trump Tower became Trump International Hotel, and the project for the second tower was postponed indefinitely. Even new hotel towers were stalled. The 665-room Octavius Tower at Caesars Palace froze construction as well; its hollow shell was a fitting testament to the economic crisis.

Even the Las Vegas monorail, the scanty public transportation that existed on the Strip, declared bankruptcy in 2010. Part of the problem was its poor design, which was embarrassing, considering that the Strip had a very large amount of potential riders in a relatively small space. Any transportation planner would have situated the monorail on the Strip, yet gaming industry interests prevailed, afraid that guests might leave, and placed the entrance to the system at the back of the resorts. Although superficially the privately funded monorail system, unveiled in 2004, appeared like an efficient mass transit option to Las Vegans, in reality, it was not. And in times of economic crisis, it was too expensive to keep the image of accessibility up.

The Las Vegas brand had been damaged. By focusing on brand rather than inherent qualities, the brand itself had damaged the sale of goods that are otherwise good. In going more upscale, it had turned itself into an icon of excess. And in the midst of the recession, excess was no longer cool. A few comments by President Obama on the city had added to the stress. "You can't go take that trip to Las Vegas or go down to the Super Bowl on taxpayers' dime," he said when criticizing companies that used federal bailout money to organize corporate junkets in Las Vegas. Because of the President's comments,

companies, such as Goldman Sachs, had cancelled conferences in Las Vegas. Nearly a year later, President Obama would again refer to the city in a town hall meeting, discussing spending during difficult economic times. "When times are tough, you tighten your belts," president Obama said. "You don't go buying a boat when you can barely pay your mortgage. You don't blow a bunch of cash in Vegas when you're trying to save for college."

Once again Las Vegas was featured on the cover of *Time Magazine.* It showed a picture of the famous "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign, with the difference that it said "Less Vegas" now. [See Image 35] Joel Stein had covered the economic recession right in its heart: Las Vegas. "Just as Las Vegas was the epicenter of the extravagant consumption of the past 20 years, now it's the deepest crater of the recession over the last year,"[93] he wrote. "Just as Americans did with their houses, casino owners borrowed way too much money to build hotels that were way too big." Las Vegas was leading the nation in terms of foreclosures and unemployment rates. In only three years, the unemployment rate went up from 3.8% to 12.3%.[94] In addition, fewer jobs were unionized since much of the typical union labor, whether it involved pouring drinks or peeling potatoes, had been outsourced. The brand of Las Vegas as the last bastion of the American Dream had vanished. Instead, the logic of the Las Vegas casino had become a metaphor of a troubled nation led into despair because of an economy built on debt financing from foreign sources and risk: "Casino Capitalism".[95]

Despite the star architecture and interior design, images of the quiet Strip, unfinished construction carcasses, and empty casino floors made for eerie sights, distributed globally as representations of crisis; they dramatically showed the world the limitations on the transformational ability of architectural icons.

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Conclusion

"The things the spectacle presents as eternal are based on change, and must change as their foundations change. The spectacle is totally dogmatic, yet it is incapable of arriving at any really solid dogma. Nothing stands still for it. This instability is the spectacle's natural condition, but it is completely contrary to its natural inclination."[1]

- Guy Debord. The Society of the Spectacle, "Thesis 71"

This dissertation has sought to understand the ways in which the Las Vegas Strip has been reconfigured. Over the past 70 years, the Las Vegas Strip has taken forms. I claim that behind the Strip's "reinventions" lies a process of symbolic destruction. Resorts on the Strip mainly distinguish themselves through symbols. Each new round of capital accumulation relies on the destruction of symbolic capital of existing resorts. Symbolic capital is typically destroyed by upping the language within the existing paradigm, or, more dramatically, through a paradigm shift, which devalues the previous phase through discourse. The competitor's symbolic destruction – not to mention the destruction of "real" resources – is eventually turned into profit. When a resort that symbolizes the newest vision of the future opens on the Strip, the previous "best" casino drops to second place. Since architectural styles assign guests social status, the clientele of the new number two shifts to a lower price level. Every time this happens, the resort becomes less profitable, until it gets razed. The innovative entry of entrepreneurs destroys the symbolic and, as a consequence, economic value of already existing resorts; symbolic destruction eventually leads to "real" demolition. The heavy competition on the Strip between symbolic capital explains why buildings have such a short lifespan.

In historicizing the "spectacle" of the Las Vegas Strip, this dissertation has attempted to fill the gap between theories of spectacle that are low on the specifics of history, and the histories of Las Vegas that are low on theory. It situated Las Vegas in a discussion of other places, which is important, since the Las Vegas Strip is increasingly regarded as a planning model for cities around the world, for better or worse.

Fundamentally, this dissertation dealt with the relationships between money, image, and space. In explaining the different metamorphoses of the Las Vegas Strip, each of these themes, and in particular the relationships between them, were emphasized. Although "high" architectural and urban theory played no part in the development of the Strip, it has been a fourth unit of analysis, since it provides an interesting lens through which to understand the various phases. "Low" theory, on the other, discourse that emerges from the gaming industry, has been part and parcel of the formation and devaluation of resorts' architectural paradigms.

The organization of space, the definition of the image, as well as the corporate structure was decided by people from the gaming industry. Therefore, their discourse mattered. They produced and disseminated knowledge, "truths" of the design of resorts, whether informally or through trade journals and conferences. It is the reformation of this

knowledge that is complicit in the devaluation of symbolic capital of existing resorts. Resorts can compete with another within a paradigm, by upping the language or co-opting forms, or, by overthrowing the paradigm in its entirety, and introducing a new "truth", which dramatically reduces the value of the previous resorts. Therefore, each new paradigm typically reacts to and critiques the preceding.

Money was the driving force behind the transformation of the Strip. The Strip is a space marked by pure, "unfettered" capitalism, its relatively unregulated nature a result of fragmented government and unincorporation. The one constant behind the transformation of the Strip was the boom-and-bust cycle of the economy, driven by a hunger for profit in a town lacking resources. The history of Las Vegas is marked by a series of economic crises. They included a 1922 railroad strike, federal prosecutions of the mafia, the 1973 oil embargo, the "Reagan" recession of the early 1980s, 9/11, and the global financial crisis of 2008. In addition, shifting regimes of capital from maverick, Mafia, and Teamster, and then to corporate ownership, increasingly funded by global capital, influenced the Strip. If anything, taking a cross-section of the history of the Strip unveils a trajectory of late capitalism, marked by disloyalty of ownership, consolidation, corporate exuberance, and chronic cycles of inflation and depression. It shows how corporations have restructured themselves, re-arranged knowledge and production, and gradually outsourced most elements of the resort operation, to focus on producing brands that can be globalized.

Image mattered to the gaming industry. Resorts asserted their symbolic value in a system of objects; architecture presented them with a malleable facade to set their relationship between other resorts on the Strip and other destinations. Architecture effectively mediated the resorts' relationship with the outside and so resorts appropriated the aesthetics of destinations that they were competing with: Western tourist towns, corporate convention centers, theme parks, such as Disneyland, Southern Europe, and global entertainment destinations with celebrity architecture. In addition, image enabled resorts to lessen the stigma attached to the gaming industry that existed in other places. Architecture also mediated relationships between resorts on the Strip. When a single street was lined with similar architectural programs, image provided the only way of distinction. Therefore, resorts fought each other with symbols, producing a space where symbols thrived, like Venturi had shown. Sometimes resorts mined images from popular culture, ranging from suburban forms to space age to medieval themes. In other cases, images of resorts were a reflection of their owners, in line with company aesthetics. Often, images were appropriated from neighboring resorts. As a consequence of this battle of images, symbols quickly became exhausted in the face of their assimilation, or outdated with the introduction of something new. However, where at the time of *Learning from Las Vegas* only façade fronts and signs turned over rapidly, since the 1990s entire resorts were imploded. In this rapid turnover of symbols, the resort's survival depended on its capacity to adjust its image to the latest condition of the market. This is why, unlike any other place, the Strip is unique in its ability to change its image, and why the image of the Strip has taken many form, successively Wild West, Los Angeles Cool, Pop City, Corporate Modern, Disneyland, Sim City, and Starchitecture.

Space was the terrain on which the gaming industry organized the production and consumption processes. The resort was the locus of the gaming industry's functions and logistics. Effectively, suburbanization was used as an effective technology of separation and isolation of people beneficial to the gambling industry. Resort typologies spatially arranged front-of-house casino floors, lobbies, high-rise towers with hotel rooms, theatres, swimming pools, nightclubs, restaurants, malls, parking garages, theme parks, and porte-cocheres; in addition to back-of-house kitchens, technical areas, laundry facilities, and employee changing rooms. Various technologies, such as construction materials and mechanisms, neon, computerized electronic message centers, animatronics, people movers, and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems, equipped the resorts. Both the resorts' spatial organization and material aspects were under a process of constant change. It is possible to speak of a spatial evolution, since designers learned from previous resorts and added to the typology. In addition, new technologies were being applied when they became available. On a larger scale, the Strip was a spatial entity that organized the various resorts a single corridor. The Strip influenced the way in which resorts were laid out, accessed, faced the street, and competed with another. At the same time, resorts affected the Strip. New resort construction shifted the center of gravity of the Strip multiple times. Under conditions of competitive capitalism, the resort had grown from a simple shoebox with rooms to a miniature city with condominiums, and the Strip from a dusty little road to a high-rise boulevard.

"High" theory has had no impact on the development of the Strip until recently, yet allowed us to understand the various phases the Strip had gone through, and more so architects' changing estimation of the Strip, which opened a space for their architectural practice. Throughout its history, the Strip has been theorized in three major contrasting interpretations: "pop city", "theme park", and "brandscape". Initially, architectural theorists were intrigued by the "vernacular" architecture of the Strip. Las Vegas was theorized and appreciated as "pop city"; its naïve attempts at representation considered a popular type of architecture made for and by the prole. However, as the Strip normalized and appropriated corporate modern aesthetics that existed elsewhere, it was no longer a topic of interest to architectural theorists. The corporate safe style was not dramatic enough to pique their interest, until resorts took on theme-park-like qualities. However, this time cultural critics loathed the architecture of the Strip, which they dismissed as "hyperreal" and "theme park". No longer did they sympathize with the commercial architecture on the Strip; instead, they critiqued it as a landscape of deception shaped by corporate greed. Only when celebrity architects were involved in the production of the Strip did some architectural theorists reevaluate their critical position toward the Las Vegas Strip. They came up with the more ambiguous term "brandscape", a space in which architects potentially subverted and exploited the brand. This theoretical framing, once again, opened a space for their architectural practice. These theoretical decampments show how theory is also spectacle, which attempts to produce Las Vegas as a unitary structure, even though the constantly shifting nature of Las Vegas does not allow for this architectural discourse. Moreover, these theoretical framings of Las Vegas were never disembodied from the theorists' own practical interests after all, meant to create a space for their architectural practice.

As a way to evoke the three-tiered analytical grounding of money, image, and space, I have tried to identify and historicize the different processes that dominated the Strip. They have been theorized as suburbanization, corporatization, Disneyfication, and global branding, and they successively coincide with the four building booms, the periodic waves of new casino resort constructions. Each building boom either conforms to a single paradigm or witnesses a paradigm shift halfway.

However, this is not to suggest that each new phase completely erases the previous one; these processes coexist. The historical layers of the Las Vegas Strip coexist in an archeology of paradigms next to, on top of, or even attached to one another. Today, most of its phases are still visible, though some more than others. The original tower of the 1955 Riviera still stands on the Strip; but whereas it was once the peak of the first building boom, it now lies swallowed up by newer and higher tower additions. The International, the first resort of the corporate phase, still stands tall, although it is called the Hilton. All of the Disney-like resorts still exist. Luxor, Treasure Island, and the Mirage remind us of the theme park days on the Strip, even though some of their themes have been undone. Even the latest additions of celebrity architecture are no more than the new paradigm about to expire, to be engulfed by a future boom of new resort construction. The Las Vegas Strip is a multilayered record with traces of various paradigms: a palimpsest. In addition, these processes to some extent have been part of the Strip since its inception. Global branding does not solely apply to the last building boom, nor does corporatization only happen in the second; Disneyfication already occurred in the third building boom, and from then until today the Las Vegas Strip is fundamentally suburban. Already since the first building boom, each of these processes has been integral to the production of the Strip, yet in different composition.

In addition, these processes show how the city is really less absurd than is assumed, and it has been marked by many of the same economic structures and cultural forces that play out in other parts of the United States as well. Las Vegas fits in a discussion of other cities, being affected by the same forces as Las Vegas is. Moreover, I claim that theoretical insights that were recent of Las Vegas and other cities have been integral to the city to its beginning. Las Vegas can be claimed “neoliberal” and “postmodern” *avant la lettre*. It is a logical city, shaped by a set of structures, government, and key interests. In addition, it has become a planning model for cities to be mimicked. Since Las Vegas has been the avatar of pro growth, the first new American metropolis of the 20th century, and the most visited place on earth, it has attracted the envy and interest of other cities. This makes the case of Las Vegas all the more relevant.

Finally, I would like to return to the concept of “spectacle”, and conclude with a reflection on the Las Vegas of today. This dissertation engaged with the theoretical tool of “spectacle”, as an entry point into the history and reconfiguration of the Las Vegas Strip as a whole. Throughout the history of the Strip, the spectacle of the Las Vegas Strip has taken many forms and images, but it has not fundamentally changed. It is possible to identify a repetition of themes: a relationship with the movie industry, the social organization of experience, and themes of nature, history, the orient, the city, and the future. The fickle condition of fetish really covers up that there was not that much

difference, rendering invisible its acceleration of turnover of the built environment as a way to accumulate capital.

This is why it is impossible to treat the Las Vegas Strip without engaging with history. For instance, I regret I could not include as much ethnographic material as I wanted in this dissertation. However, the transient nature of demographics and the built environment of the Strip challenge the method of ethnography. To fully understand the dynamics of the Las Vegas Strip, extended periods of time have to be considered. It is easy to think that things are new on the Strip, since renovations and implosions continuously edge out what is old so that it can resurface as new. Space in Las Vegas suffers from amnesia. Through history, however, it is possible to see returning themes and repetitions of the same.

However, contrary to Guy Debord's suggestion, spectacle is not seamless. The symbolic disruptions that accompany the economic crises of the Strip expand theories of spectacle. In Las Vegas, spectacle has created its own bubble multiple times, which popped in dramatic fashion. This crisis of spectacle is also a spectacle of crisis, and it eventually leads to a reconfiguration of spectacle. For instance, Las Vegas has currently become the poster child of urban crisis, with images of cranes suspended in mid-air, deserted casino floors, foreclosed homes, and half-dry Lake Mead circulating globally as the dominant images of our current problems. These images alter the actions of investors. Las Vegas reminds us that spectacle is connected to speculation. If excessive spectacle is the ultimate speculative act, then the spectacle of crisis is the antithesis to speculation, the visible aftermath of speculation gone awry. Not coincidentally, the etymologies of both "spectacle" and "speculation" are derived from the Latin "specere": seeing. Investors speculate on images that they produce and consume.

Already, the current paradigm is changing as a result of the biggest crisis the resort industry has seen in its history. For the first time, Las Vegas is receiving fewer visitors than in previous years – a strange fact for a town used to exponential growth. There is no doubt that the crisis will shape the paradigm. The question is: how will the Strip react to the current crisis? Already, some corporations are starting to rebrand themselves as frugal and affordable, rather than high-end and exclusive, and many question the end of the megaresort. If there is one thing that the Strip has learned from its own history, it is how to adjust to the latest market conditions. And, since the Las Vegas Strip is always under constant change, this project is destined to be outdated the moment I cease writing it.

Ironically, the recession has only made the Las Vegas model stronger, as virtually bankrupt jurisdictions desperately seek to legalize gambling and attract casinos, hoping to bring in new tax dollars. Las Vegas style resorts now mushrooms globally in Singapore, Pagcor City in Manila Bay, and Jeju City in South Korea. Some cities aspire to have an actual Las Vegas like Strip, such as the Cotai Strip in Macau and Vietnam's Ho Tram Strip.

The city of Las Vegas is suffering, however. Backed by the most pro-growth economic policies possible, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Area has been the fastest growing city in the United States during the 1990s. At one point, its future was shining bright, the last

remaining bastion of the American dream, the “last Detroit”, a unionized paradise for workers. But even though the Strip has diversified from gambling to tourism to entertainment, it still based its economy on the discretionary spending of outside visitors. As a result of the current crisis, Las Vegas is emptying out. The government, now broke, detracts itself from services even more. There are increasing accounts of homeless living in storm drains underneath the Las Vegas Strip. If Las Vegas has been the avatar of pro-growth economics of most cities in the United States, what can we learn from the current state of Las Vegas? In addition, what does trickle-down mean in the context of storm drain housing? Can a project like CityCenter, the latest megaresort on the Strip, really lift Las Vegas out of crisis?

Although Project CityCenter presents itself as drastically new, it fits perfectly in the tradition of Las Vegas resorts. It uses image as a way to assert its status, attempting to devalue existing resorts through asserting a new paradigm. This new paradigm lays a claim on authenticity, devaluing the previous replica architecture. However, what is new that it uses the LEED green building standard. Hopefully, this will make the resort last longer. However, LEED does not address symbolic sustainability. And looking at the recent history of the Las Vegas Strip, it seems that each new vision of the future is turning into the past more quickly than before. The themed Disney-like resorts, barely a decade old, already appear degraded.

There is a tragedy and liberty in the same forces that destroy resorts on the Las Vegas Strip. On the flipside of symbolic destruction and waste, lies interesting experimentation. The Las Vegas Strip a visually stunning environment and a thriving public space. The Strip is one of the most visited pedestrian realms in the United States, and virtually every American has at least an opinion on the architecture of the individual resorts. Moreover, the Strip offers a liberating notion of architectural identity and style, never stuck in a single mold for too long. The Las Vegas Strip is a laboratory of formulation of new visions, with the tragedy that they don’t last long. On the Las Vegas Strip, architects are riding a fine line between creation and destruction. The Las Vegas Strip is as much a laboratory as a cemetery of architectural innovation. [See Image 1]

The Las Vegas Strip is more relevant than ever. Now that elite architecture has come to the Strip, architects and architectural theorists are confronted with their role in the production and devaluation of symbolic capital. And similar to resorts on the Las Vegas Strip, architects are gradually entering in a race of the spectacular, empowered by the interurban global rivalry of cities, which are increasingly shaped around image.

The battle for symbolic capital on the Las Vegas Strip is a metaphor for architects and cities globally.

Endnotes

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Images Chapter One
Introduction

Image 1) “Renewal”, (based on Joseph Wright of Derby: “Annual Girandola of Castel St. Angelo”, 1776), 2001. Vegas Vanitas series. Oil on linen, 48” x 61.”

Image 2) “City Planner”, (based on Nicolas Poussin: “John on the Island of Patmos”, 1640), 2001, oil on linen, 48” x 63.”

Image 3) “The Hundred Year Flood”, (based on Nicolas Poussin: “Winter”, from his series “The Four Seasons”, 1660 –1664), 2001, oil on linen, 48” x 66”, permanent collection, Las Vegas Art Museum, gift of Glenn Schaeffer.

Images Chapter Two
From Wild West to Los Angeles Cool: The Suburbanization of the Strip (1941 – 1963)

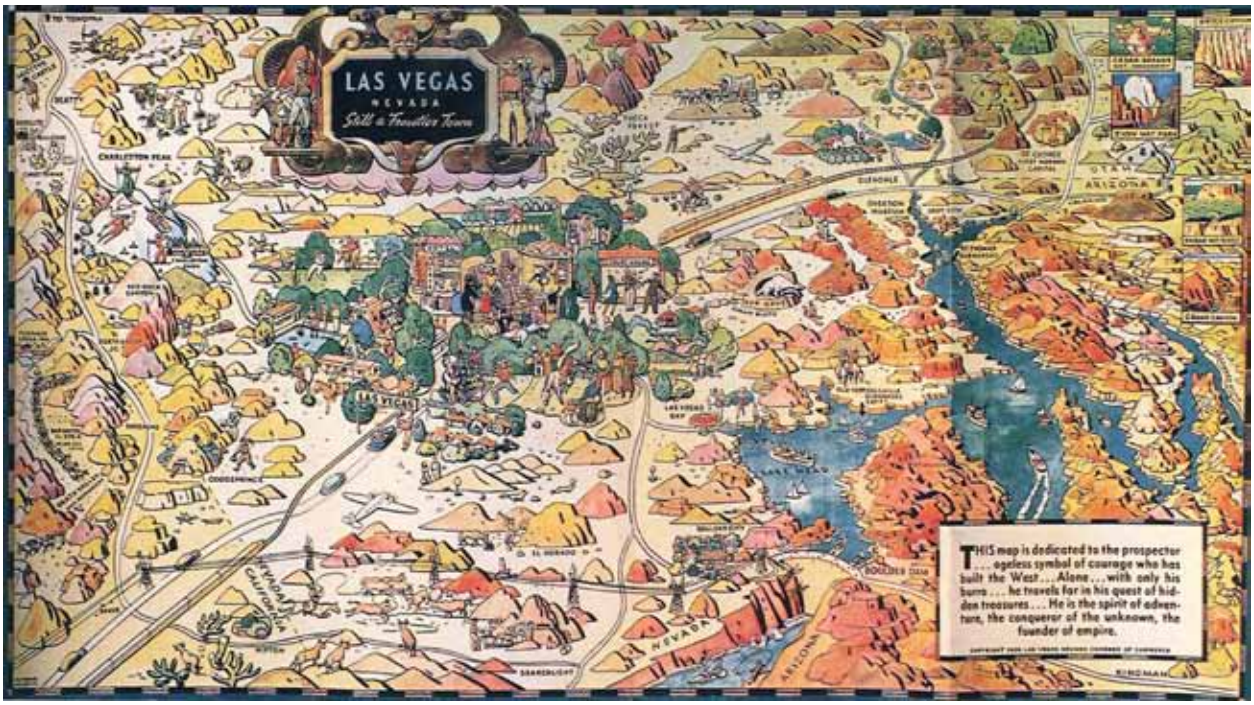

Image 1) The Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce marketed Las Vegas as “Still a Frontier Town”, evoking a daring and individualist western spirit. “This map is dedicated to the prospector … ageless symbol of courage, who has built the West … alone … with only his burro … he travels far in his quest of hidden treasures … He is the spirit of adventure, the conqueror of the unknown, the founder of empire.”[1]

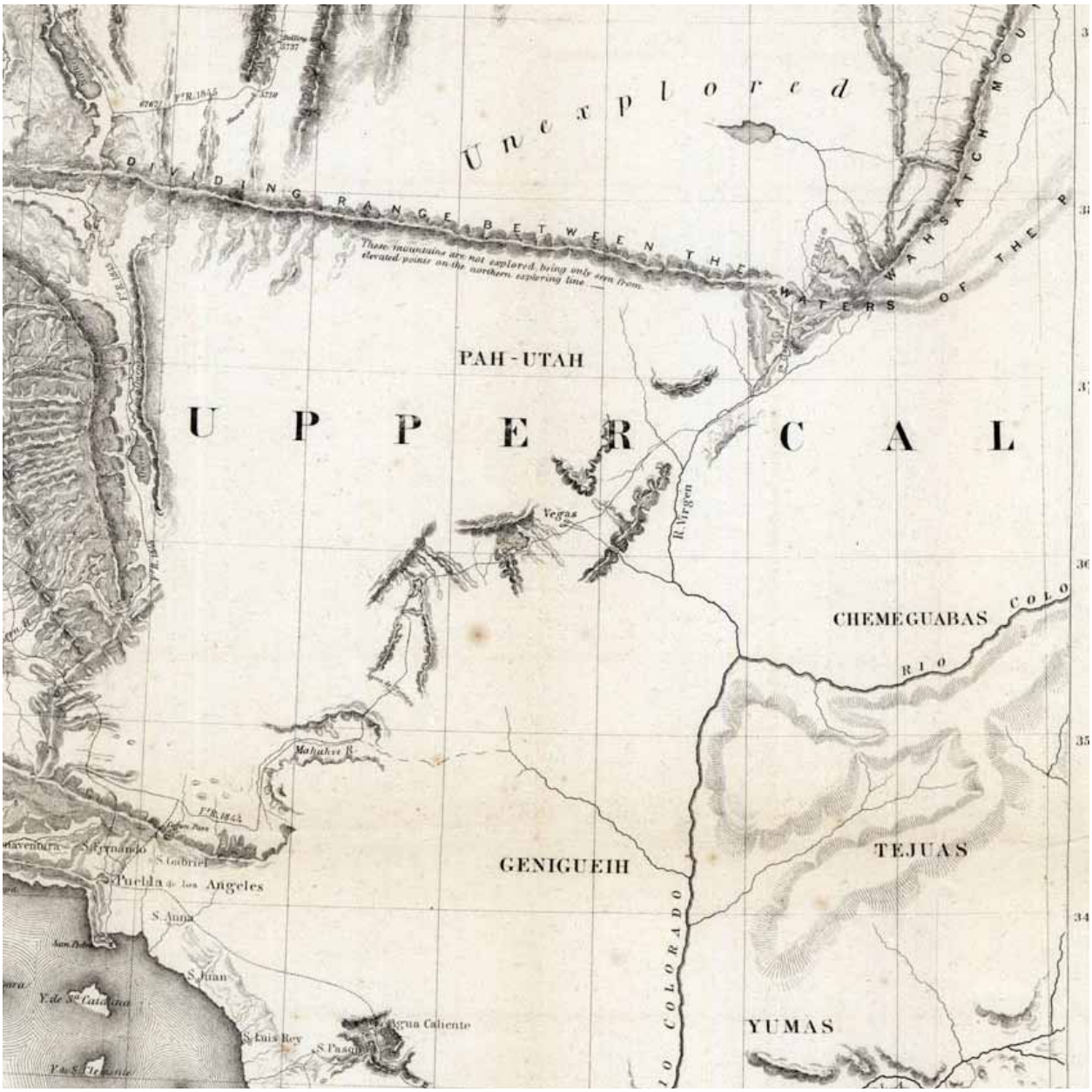

Image 2) Explorer John Fremont had literally put Las Vegas, Spanish for “the meadows”, on the map. “… We encamped in the midst of another very large basin, at a camping ground called Las Vegas … The taste of the water is good, but rather too warm to be agreeable; the temperature being 71 in the one and 73 in the other. They, however, afford a delightful bathing place,” he wrote in his journal for May 3, 1844. [2]

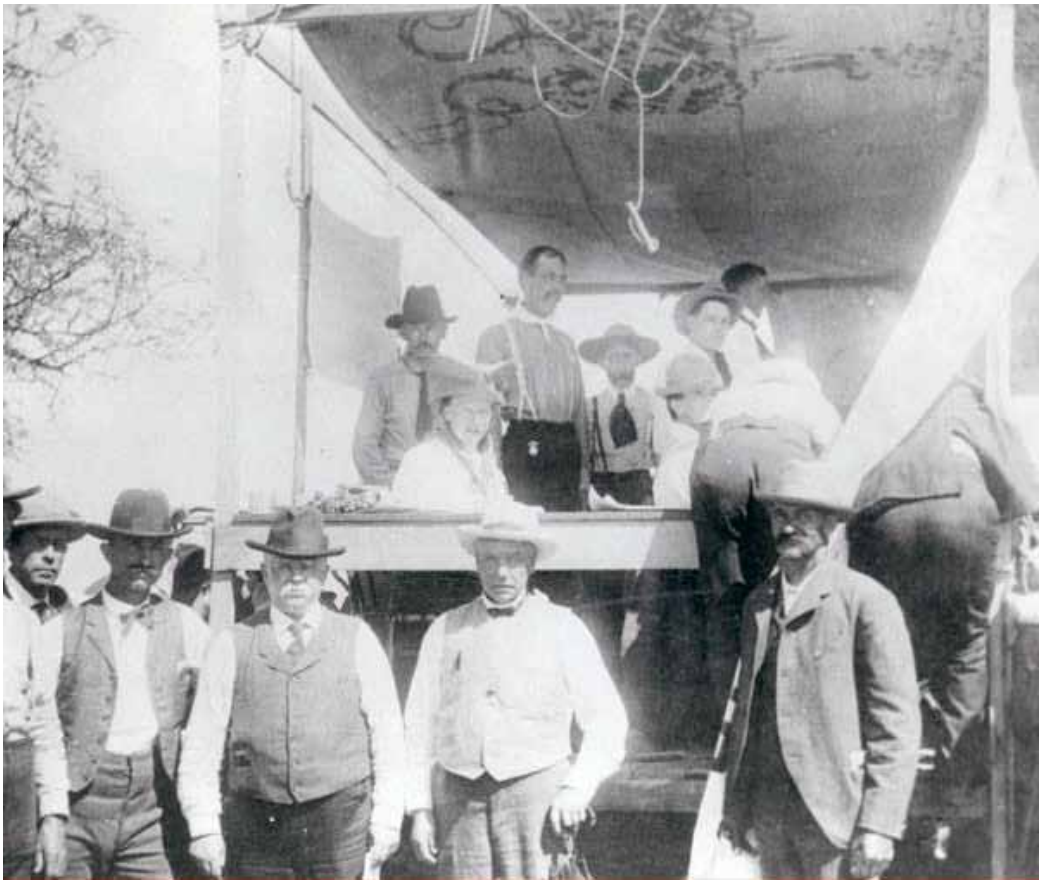

Image 3) Las Vegas was founded as a typical railroad town when Senator Clark sold off lots. The auction was so successful it lasted until the next day, when all of the 1200 lots were sold off. [3]

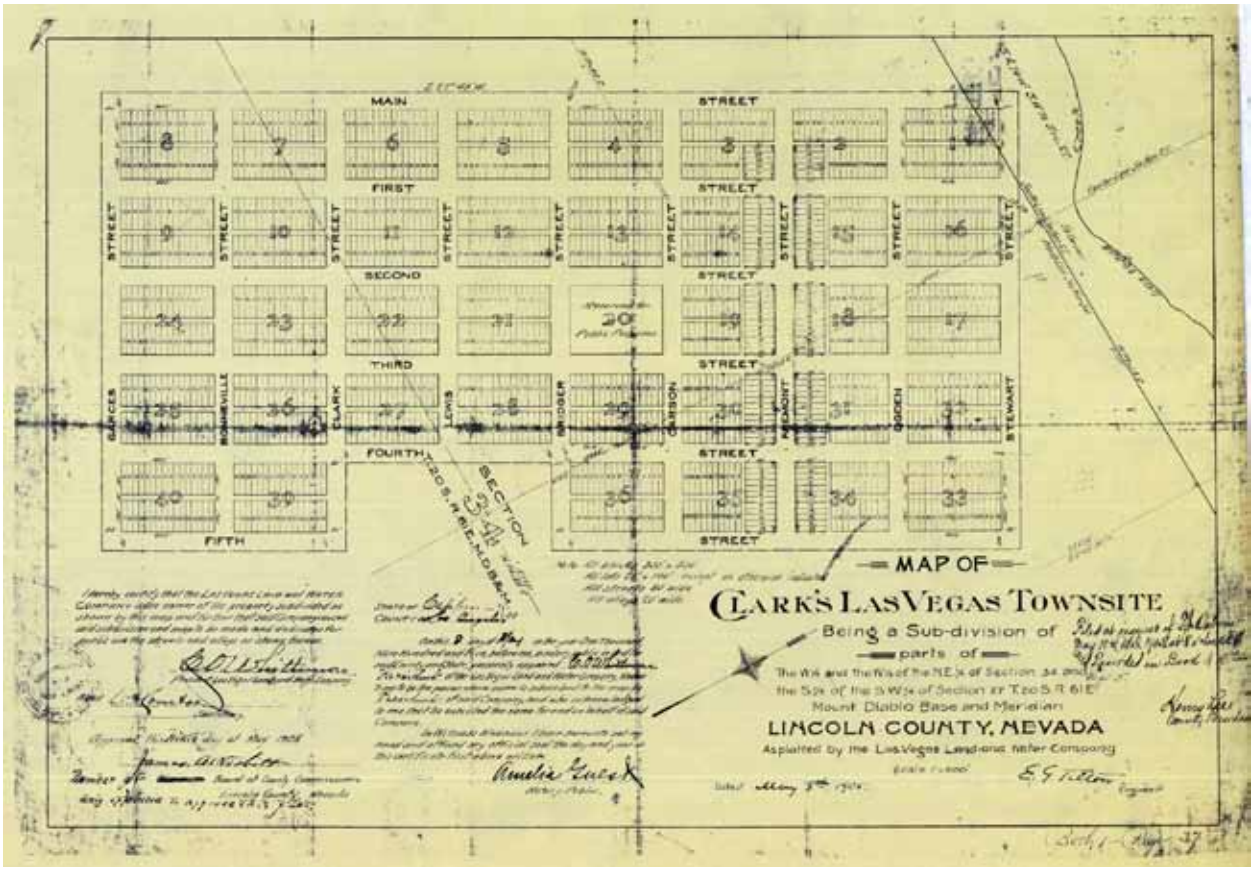

Image 4) The lots, laid out in a gridiron pattern, were meant for small establishments that accommodated to railroad travelers. To facilitate speculation they all had the same size; the most valuable ones were near the railroad. [4]

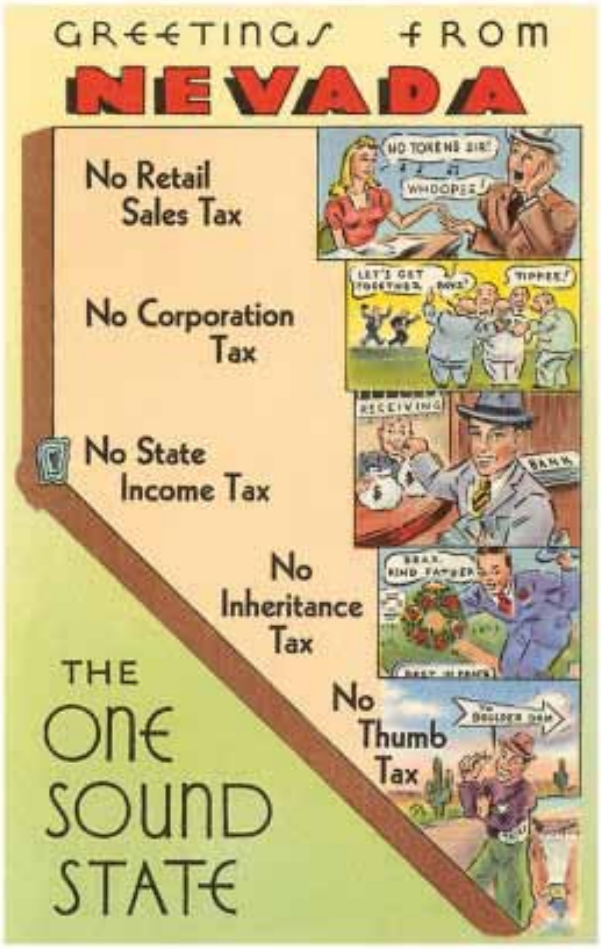

Image 5) In 1935, Nevada started the marketing campaign “One Sound State” to draw wealthy people to the state, and distributed postcards like this one. “No retail sales tax, no corporation tax, no state income tax, no inheritance tax, no thumb tax (thumbtacks).” [5]

Image 6) The large numbers of neon signs had earned Fremont Street in downtown the nickname “Glitter Gulch”. Hotel Apache, Las Vegas Club, Frontier Club, and Pioneer Club each reflected a Western image the town attempted to market. [6]

Image 7) Hull was the first to build a resort along Los Angeles Highway, the future Strip. Because of the large tracts available outside of the city, Hull could effectively build a more spacious suburban model of hotels downtown, while adding resort facilities. [7]

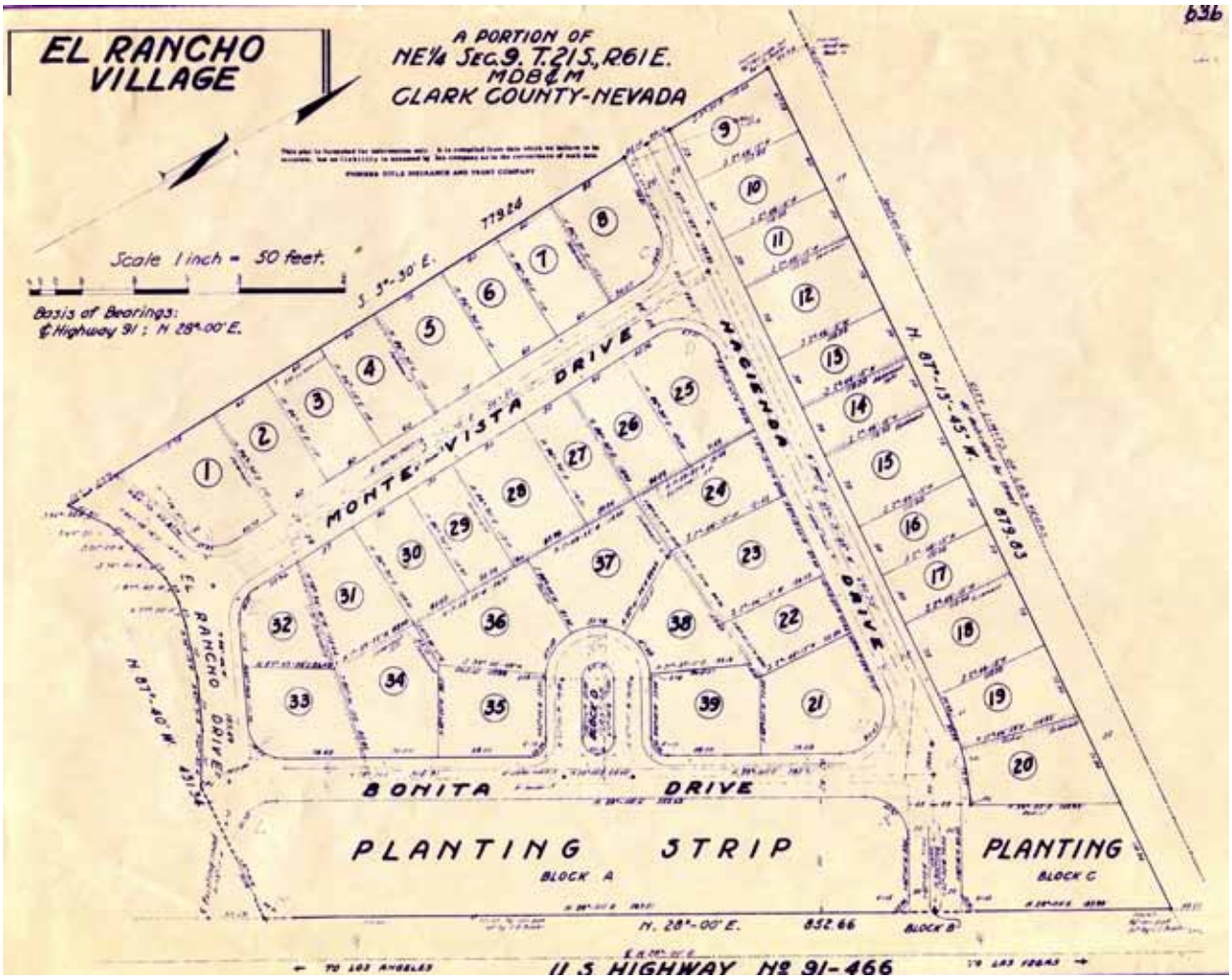

Image 8) The 39 lots of The El Rancho Village were laid out in a typical suburban subdivision, so as to accommodate those longer in town fulfilling the residency requirement, providing them with the suburban lifestyle they were used to. [8]

Image 9) The swimming pool in front of the resort, plus the windmill sign, were meant to attract drivers. The text on the back of the postcard also emphasized the Western image and various recreational facilities, in addition to Las Vegas' climate. "Visitors to Las Vegas step back through the years into a genuine 'old West' frontier town, that magically retains its atmosphere yet at the same time keeps step with modern times. Hospitality prevails at El Rancho! Swimming, riding, casino, dinner dancing – Land of Sunshine and Clear Desert Air." [9]

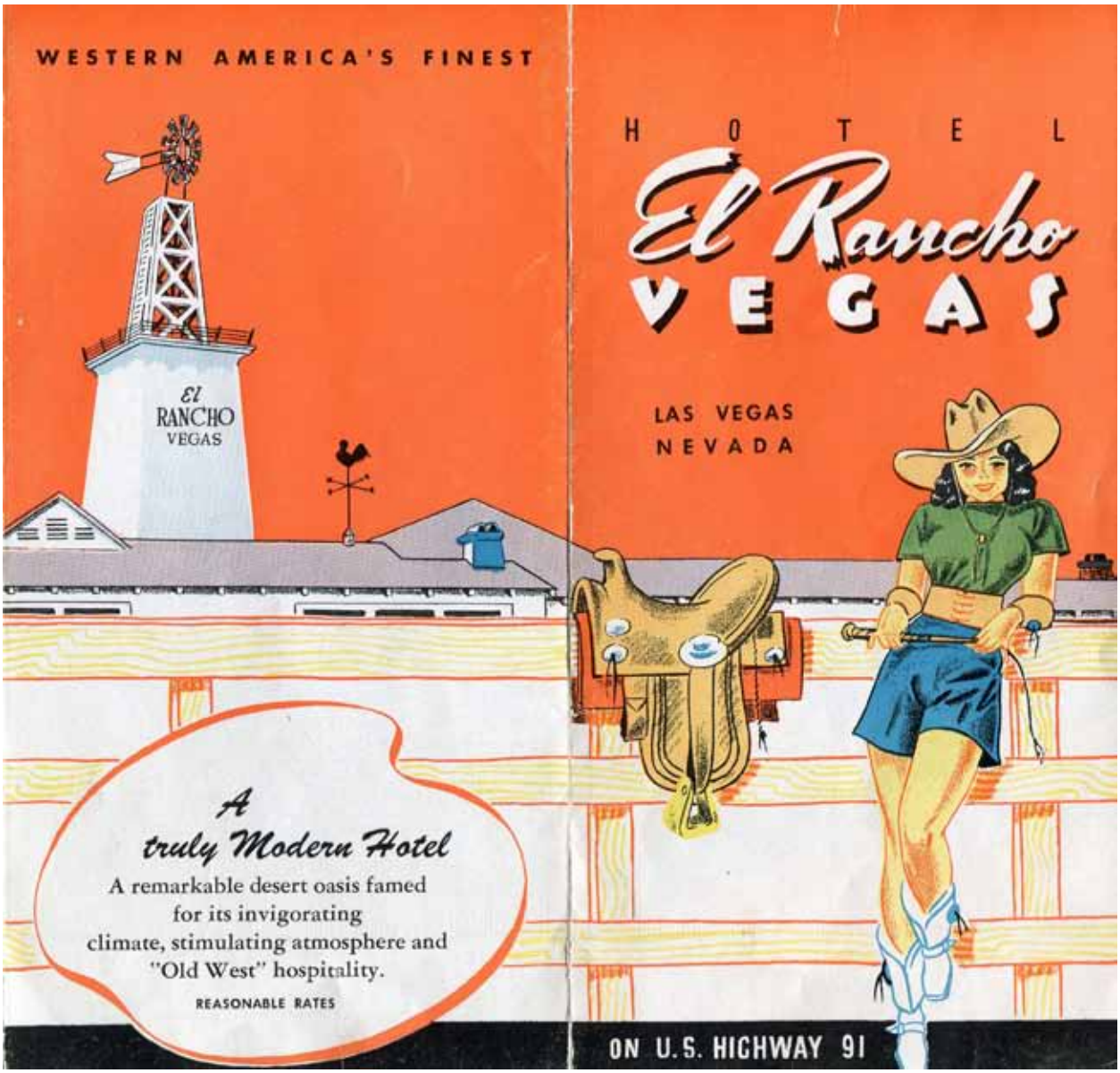

Image 10) Seemingly contradicting themes complimented another at El Rancho Vegas; the western image conveyed an “Old West” hospitality, while guests could still enjoy the comfort of “A Truly Modern Hotel”. [10]

Image 11) The Last Frontier started the pool race on the Strip when it situated its pool right next to the highway, even more so than the El Rancho. Horse-drawn carriages drove up and down the airport to pick up guests. [11]

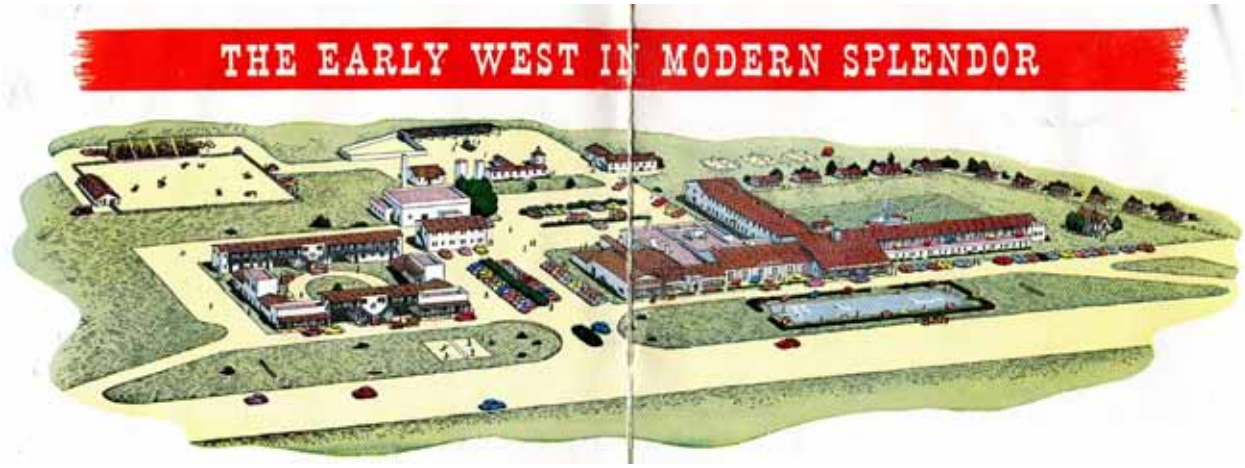

Image 12) Even though the Last Frontier evoked the Old West, it still presented itself as the most novel resort. “The Early West in Modern Splendor”, was the resort’s slogan. [12]

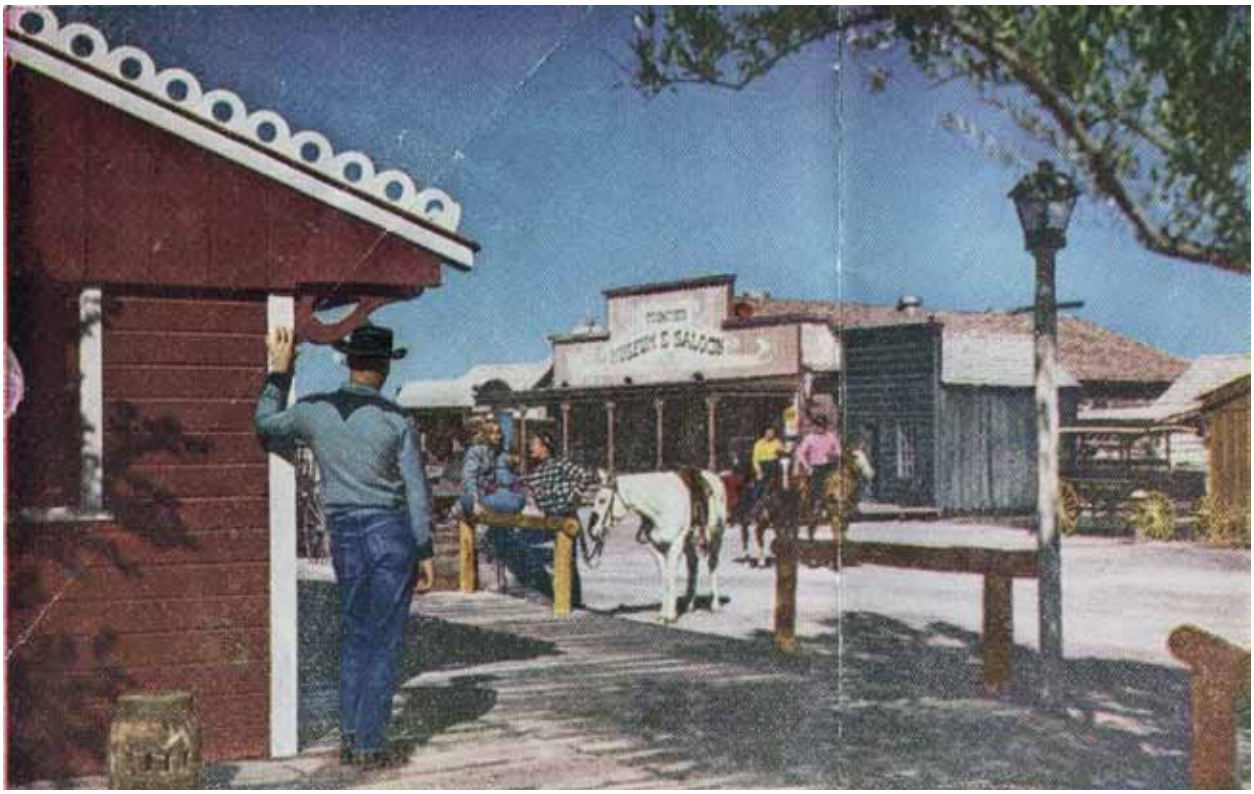

Image 13) Moore created an “authentic” Wild West village, the Last Frontier Village, as an “advertising method”, the first in a tradition of theme parks on the Strip. [13]

Image 14) The Little Church of the West was an exact scaled-down replica of an existing western church in California. It preceded the copies and miniatures that would surface the Strip in the 1990s. [14]

Image 15) The Flamingo broke the Wild West paradigm, when it introduced sleek modern aesthetics that mirrored developments in Los Angeles roadside cafes. [15]

Image 16) The Flamingo had shifted the Strip further south, and was even more self-contained in its layout than the Last Frontier and El Rancho. [16]

Image 17) Each of the Thunderbird's distinguishing features were displayed on this postcard: a porte-cochere and an observation tower topped with an imaginary Native American bird. [17]

Image 18) The rectilinear forms of the Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired Desert Inn contrasted with the curvilinear sign designed by YESCO that borrowed from modern artists such as Miró. In appropriating forms from elite architecture and art, the Desert Inn preceded the resorts of the new millennium. [18]

Image 19) The Sahara hired a company to coordinate the North African theme through all aspects of the resort, including menus, uniforms, architecture, murals, and the advertising. [19]

Image 20) YESCO's design for the 56 feet high Sands sign, the largest sign on the Strip, stepped up the sign race. [20]

Image 21) The Flamingo responded to the competition with a new 80-foot sign, dubbed the “Champagne Tower”. Tom Wolfe vividly described the landmark: “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.” [21] [22]

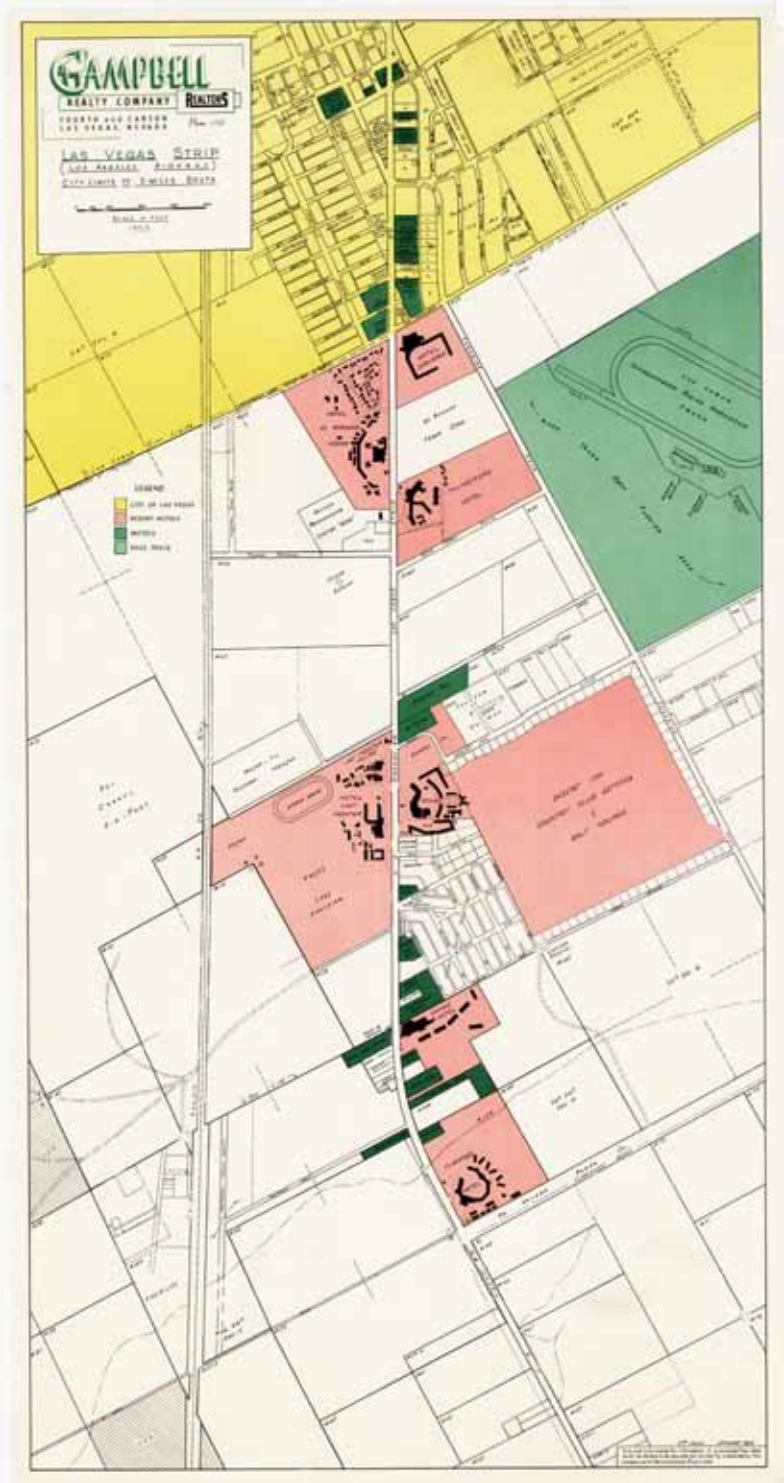

Image 22) In 1953, the Strip counted seven major resorts and 1800 hotel rooms. The Sahara and El Rancho set the north side of Strip, while the center and south end still offered space for new resort development. [23]

Image 23) When nuclear detonations were conducted on the Nevada Test Site, Las Vegas became the epi-center of atomic culture, with Miss Atomic Bomb beauty contests and Atomic Cocktail parties. [24]

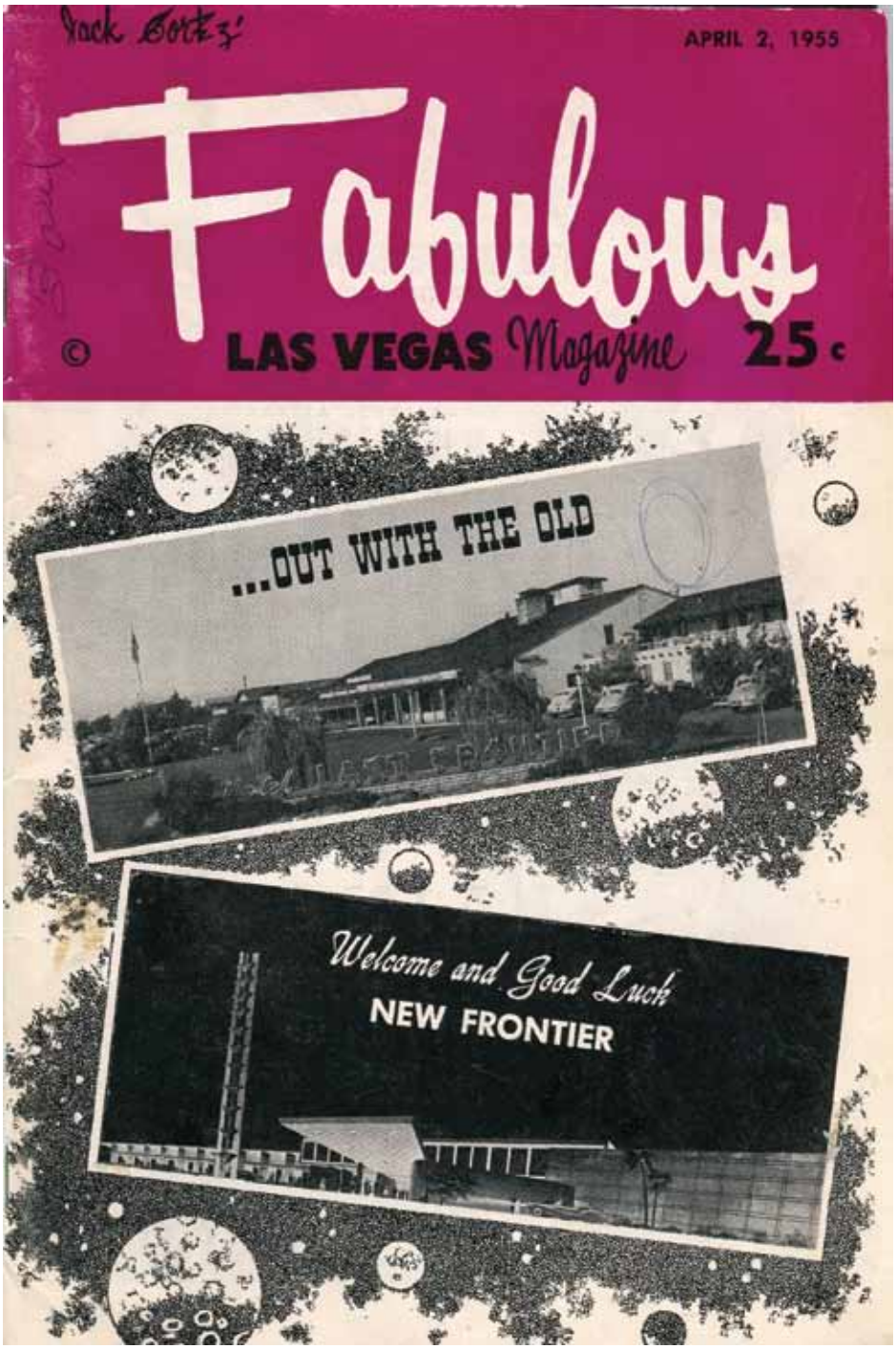

Image 24) The cover of *Fabulous Las Vegas Magazine*, the entertainment guide that existed from 1949 to 1973, paid tribute to the conversion of the Last Frontier into the New Frontier. The Wild West theme almost diametrically opposed the space age aesthetics and the 126-foot trylon, the highest marquee on the Strip. [25]

Image 25) Arthurian lettering and a royal crown contributed to the Royal Nevada's theme of an invented medieval Nevadan past. It was a precedent for resorts that derived imagery from history. [26]

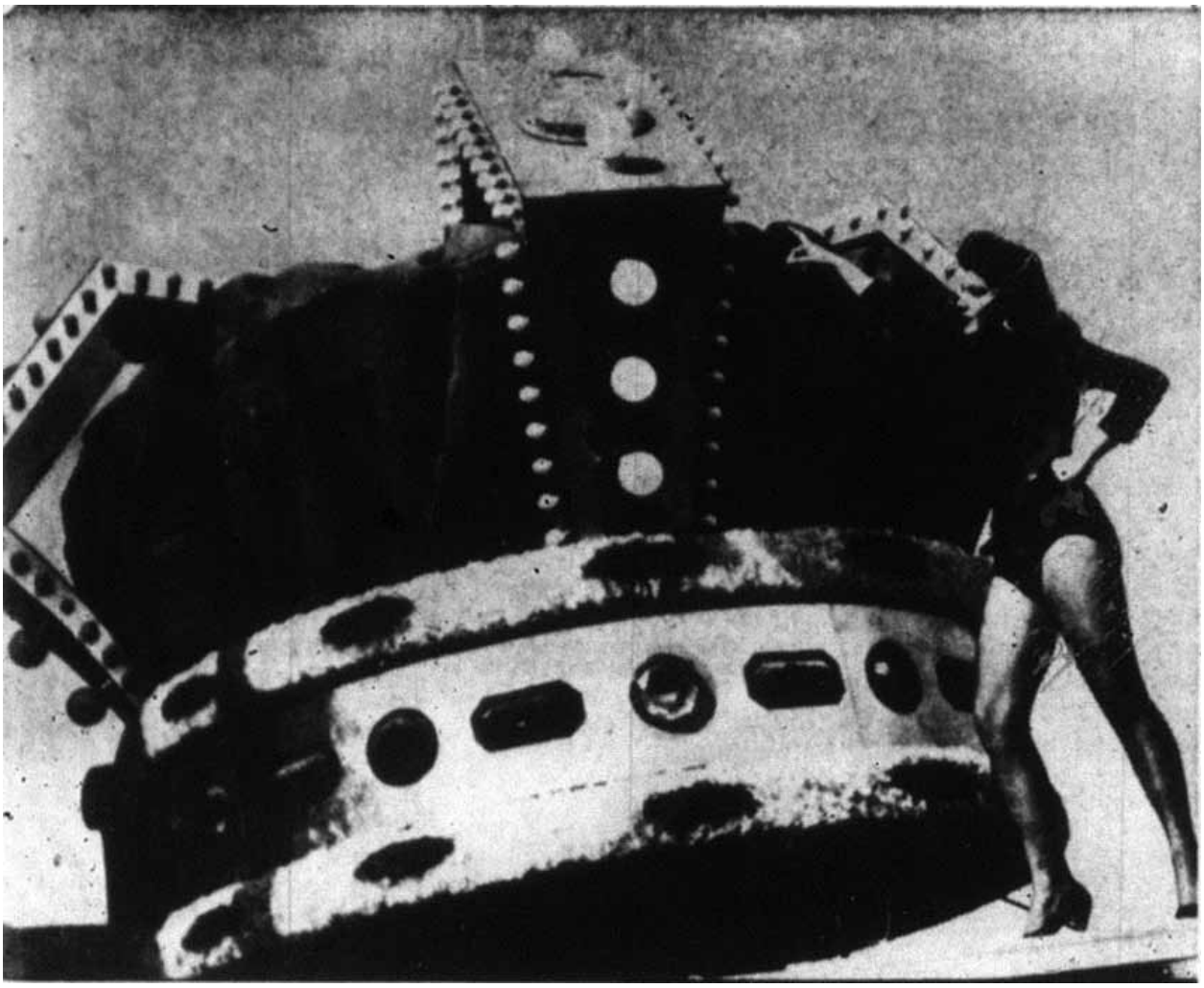

Image 26) The erection of the crown sign of the Royal Nevada was turned into an important media event. A Coronet Dancer at the Royal Nevada directed the hoisting of the illuminated crown, designed by YESCO with a 23-karat gold-leaf band, bordered with simulated ermine, and decorated with faceted cut-glass “stones”.[27]

Image 27) The Royal Nevada used an indoor musical fountain to set itself apart from other resorts, including the Dunes, which had a less elaborate outside dancing-water feature. It was explicitly highlighted in the advertising, and reflected in the resort's slogan, "Home of the Dancing Waters". [28]

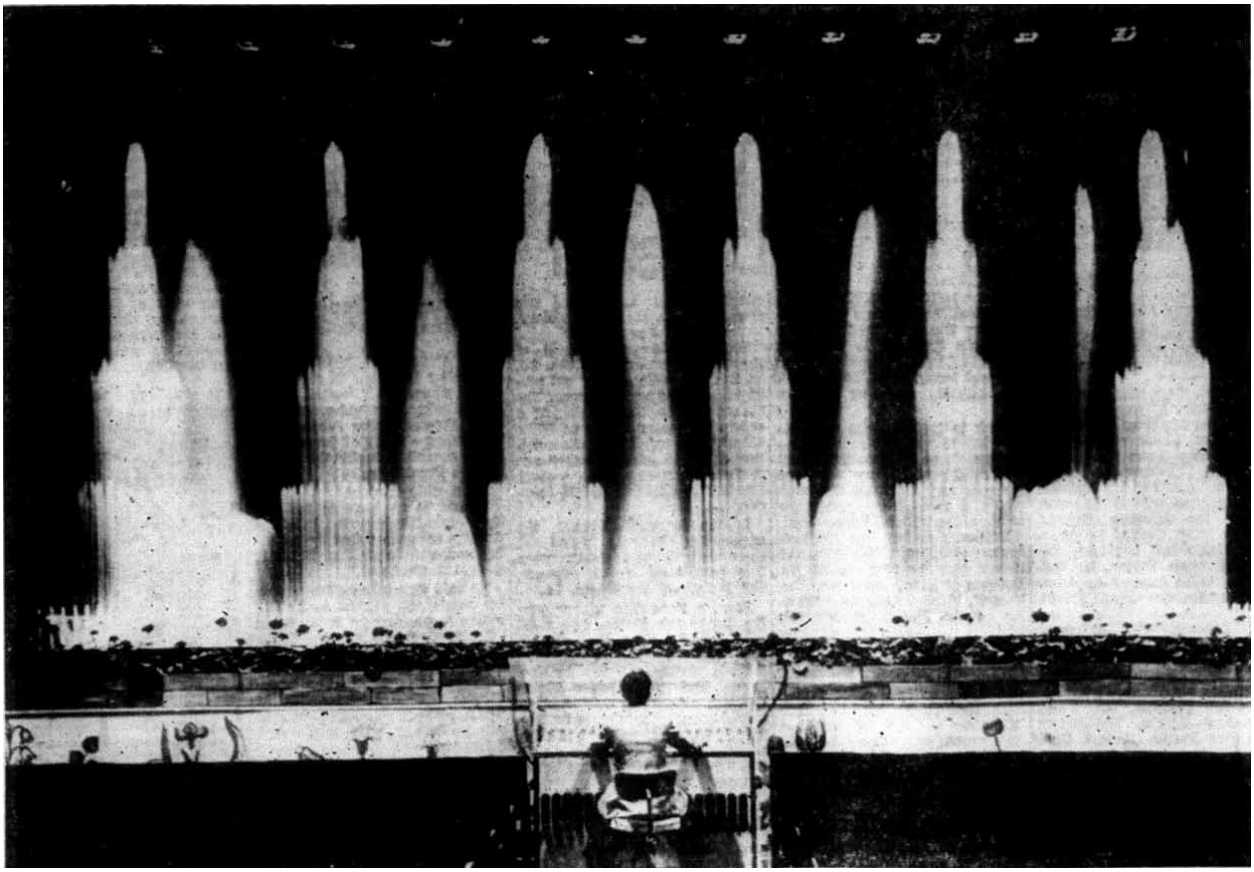

Image 28) The musical fountain that the Desert Inn added to its resort in 1956 was most likely snapped up from the Royal Nevada after its bankruptcy. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* had taken the image from Bakken Amusement Park in Copenhagen, Denmark, to announce the free daily outside spectacle on the Strip. [29]

Image 29) The 9-story Riviera, “a new high in the Las Vegas sky”, used height to distinguish itself from the other resorts. In the advertisement, the low-rise resorts dwarf in relationship to the tower. [30]

Image 30) The Dunes, "Miracle in the Desert", introduced an Arabian Nights theme. It started a trend of Arabian imagery among resorts, which naturally associated themselves with the exotic images of a lavish desert taken from *One Thousand and One Nights*. [31]

Image 31) YESCO designed a 35-foot fiberglass standing sultan with a turban that featured a gem made out of an automobile headlight. [32]

Image 32) The slightly uncanny, oversized sultan became a major landmark on the Strip that marked the entrance above the porte-cochere. It played a scale game with the rest of the resort, making it appear smaller from afar. [33]

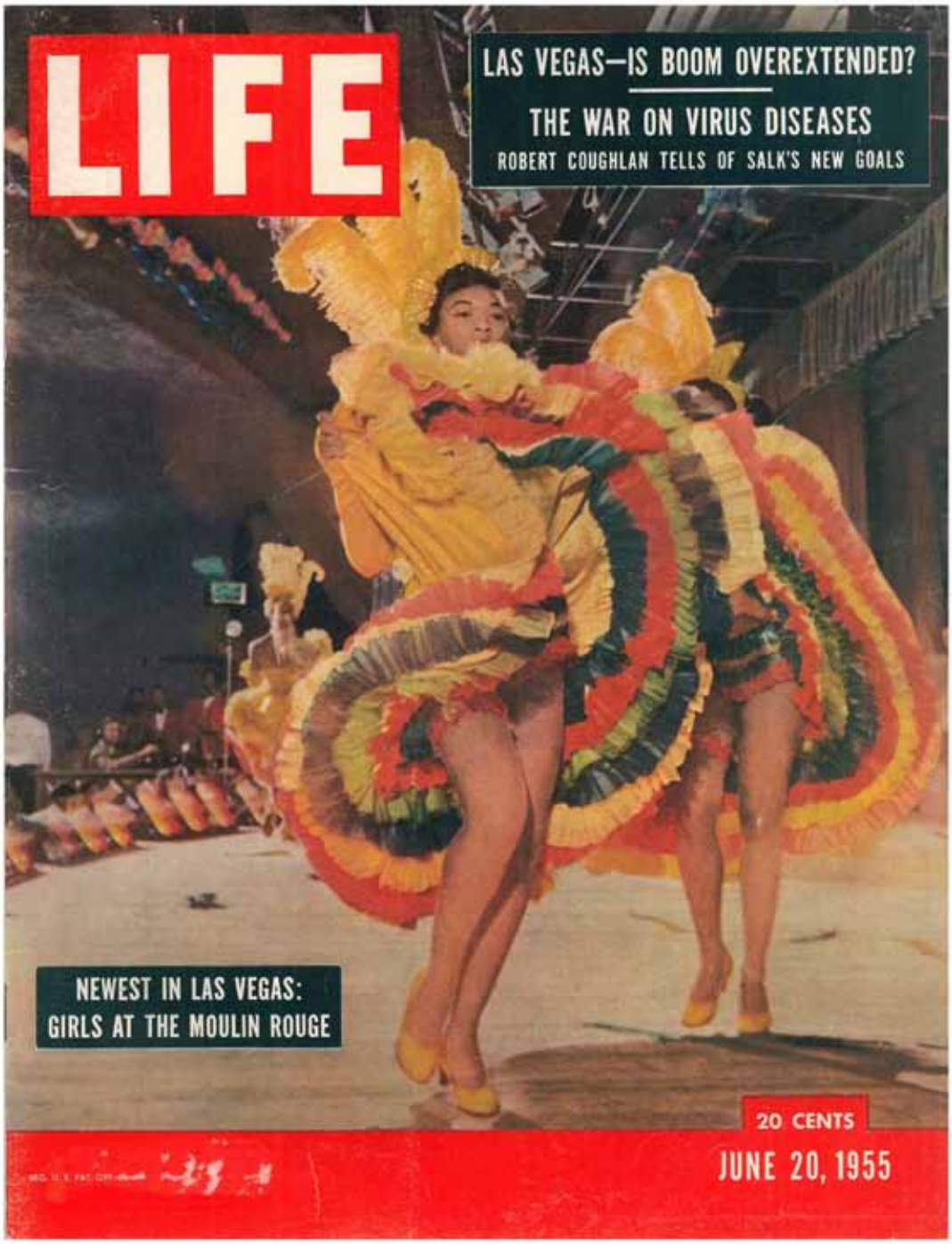

Image 33) The cover of *Life* magazine, June 20, 1955, featured a showgirl from the Moulin Rouge, a new resort that was situated in West Las Vegas where the black population was forced to live. It opened on 24 May 1955 as the first Las Vegas casino that was not segregated. However, like the other new resorts it struggled to survive and declared bankruptcy that same year in December. "Is Boom Overextended?" asked the magazine.

Image 34) The Hacienda lured families to the Strip, by offering miniature golf, go-cart racing, and the all-inclusive vacation package with airfare. [34]

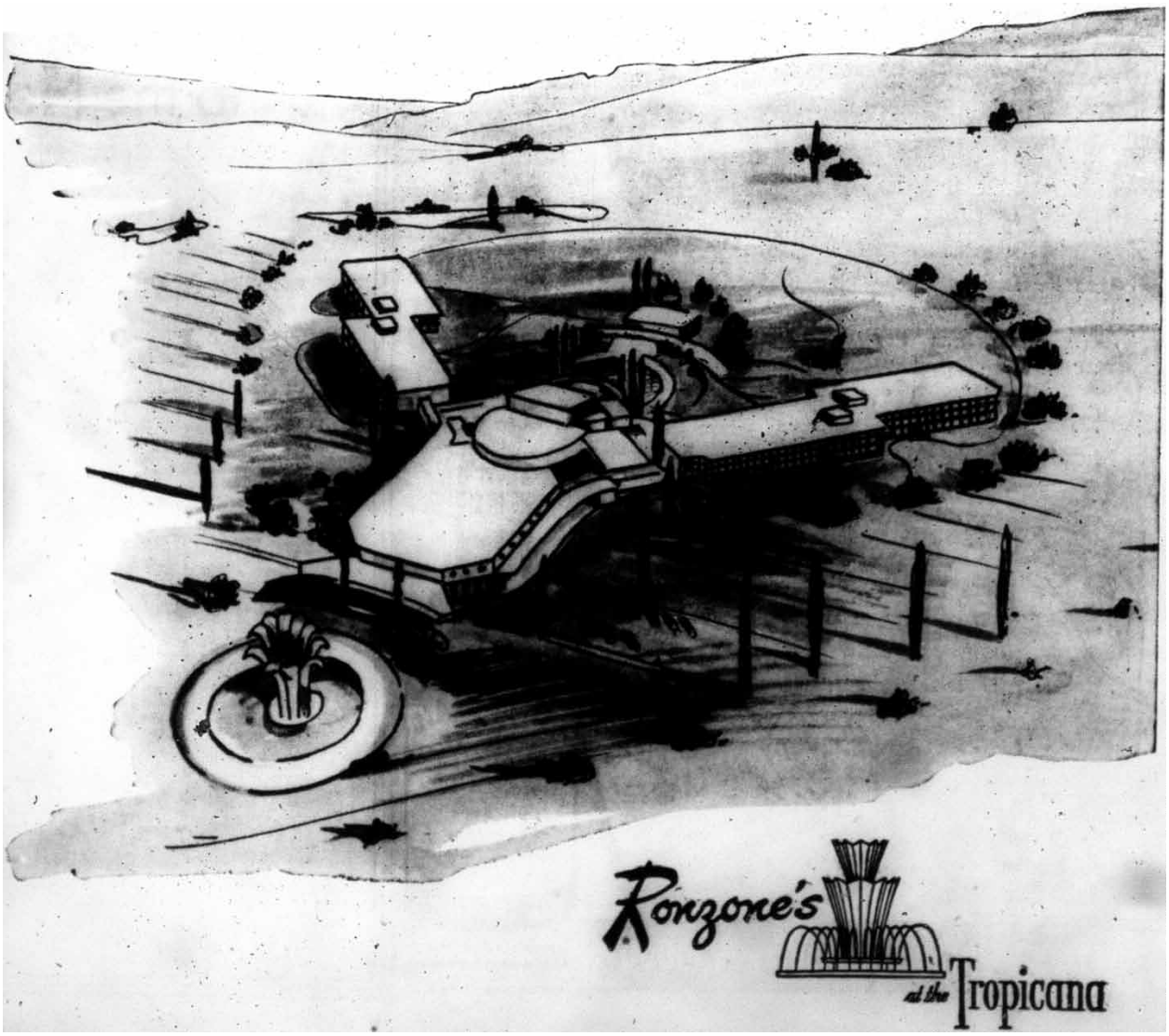

Image 35) The 60-foot tulip-shaped fountain of the Tropicana continued the fountain race, whereas the Y-shape and vertical segregation of the front and back of house set a low-rise precedent to the future high-rises on the Strip. [35]

Image 36) The Stardust, the largest hotel in the world, managed to place 1065 rooms in five parallel two-story structures. Contrary to the Tropicana, no money was spent on the landscaping; it was one giant parking lot. [36]

Image 37) The only defining feature of the Stardust was its 216-foot-long sign that doubled as a façade. A rocket underneath the sign managed to frame it as a must-photograph sight on the Strip. [37]

Image 38) Besides a “Promenade of European Beauties”, the inaugural “Lido de Paris” on the Stardust’s Café Continental Stage featured a Neapolitan street scene, and a replica of the Eiffel tower. Many of the scenes introduced on stage would surface in more permanent architectural versions during the 1990s. [38]

Image 39) By the end of the first building boom, the Strip had almost fully suburbanized. The Strip was marked by different shaped pools, lawns, signs, low-rise structures, and parking lots. Looking north from the center of the Strip, the New Frontier and the Stardust can be seen on the left, and the Desert Inn on the right. [39]

Image 40) Each resort of the first building boom followed the low-rise suburban typology, except for the Riviera. Successively, the postcard depicts the Flamingo, Sands, Dunes, Tropicana, Desert Inn, New Frontier, Royal Nevada, Riviera, Hacienda, El Rancho, Thunderbird, and Sahara. The postcard industry matured in the 1950s and 1960s with the rise of the resort industry on the Strip; their interests strategically aligned. [40]

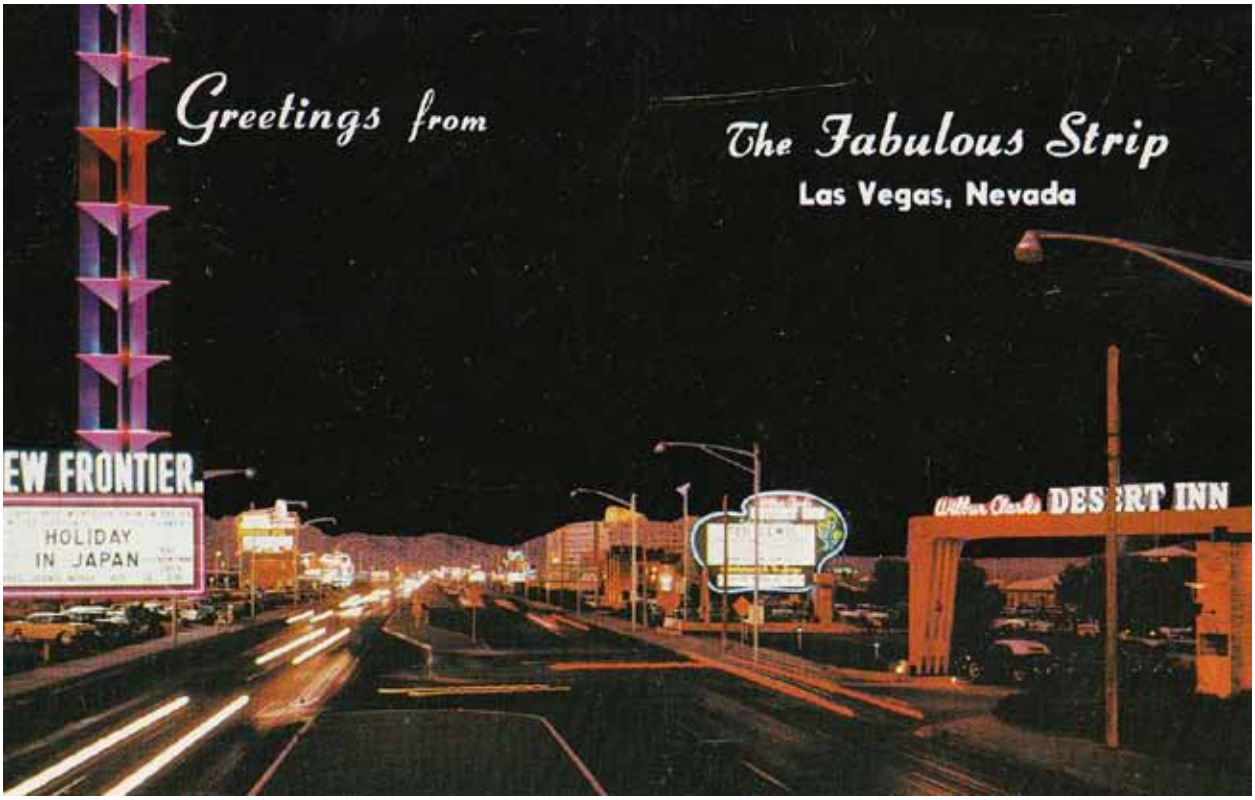

Image 41) Neon signage defined much of the experience of the Las Vegas Strip by the end of the first building boom. Looking north from the center of the Strip, the color-changing pylon of the New Frontier and the Desert Inn cactus sign and entrance are visible. [41]

Endnotes

[1] Chamber of Commerce Las Vegas brochure, 1939. Copyright Las Vegas Nevada Chamber of Commerce.

[2] Detail of the "Map of Oregon and upper California from the surveys of John Charles Frémont and other authorities," 1848. Courtesy of UNLV Special Selections.

[3] Auction of Las Vegas Townsite, 1905. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[4] "Clark's Las Vegas Townsite," 1905. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[5] Postcard of Nevada.

[6] Fremont Street, 1948. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[7] Aerial photograph of El Rancho Vegas. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[8] El Rancho Village. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[9] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[10] El Rancho brochure. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[11] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[12] Drawing taken from menu of the Last Frontier. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[13] Image from the Last Frontier brochure. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[14] Image from the Last Frontier brochure. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[15] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[16] The Flamingo, circa 1948. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[17] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[18] Drawing by YESCO. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[19] The Sahara advertisements. *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.

[20] Drawing by YESCO. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[21] Wolfe, Tom. 1977. *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby.* New York: Bantam Books.

[22] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[23] Map of "Las Vegas Strip," 1953. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[24] Miss Atomic Bomb, 1957. Courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

[25] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[26] Postcard. Courtesy of Nevada State Museum Archives.

[27] Photograph from the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 19 April 1955.

[28] Advertisement in *Fabulous Las Vegas Magazine*. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[29] "Dancing Waters at the Desert Inn." Photograph from *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 20 June 1956.

[30] Advertisement taken from *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.

[31] Advertisement taken from *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.

[32] Drawing by YESCO. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[33] Photograph. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[34] Postcard. Vintage Vegas. Online image. Flickr.

[35] Detail of an advertisement of the Ronzone's fashion store as it appeared in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.

[36] Courtesy of Las Vegas Conventions and Visitors Authority.

[37] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[38] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[39] Postcard of "The Fabulous Las Vegas Strip," circa 1960. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[40] Postcard. Courtesy of Nevada State Museum Archives.

[41] Postcard of "The Fabulous Strip," circa 1959. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

Images Chapter Three
From Pop to Modern: The Corporatization of the Strip (1964–1984)

Image 1) The erection of the 180-foot Dunes sign started the Pop City era, or the “Golden Age of the Sign”. It was so large and fiercely lit that it rivaled its referent, the expressive modernist “Diamond of the Dunes” high-rise. [1]

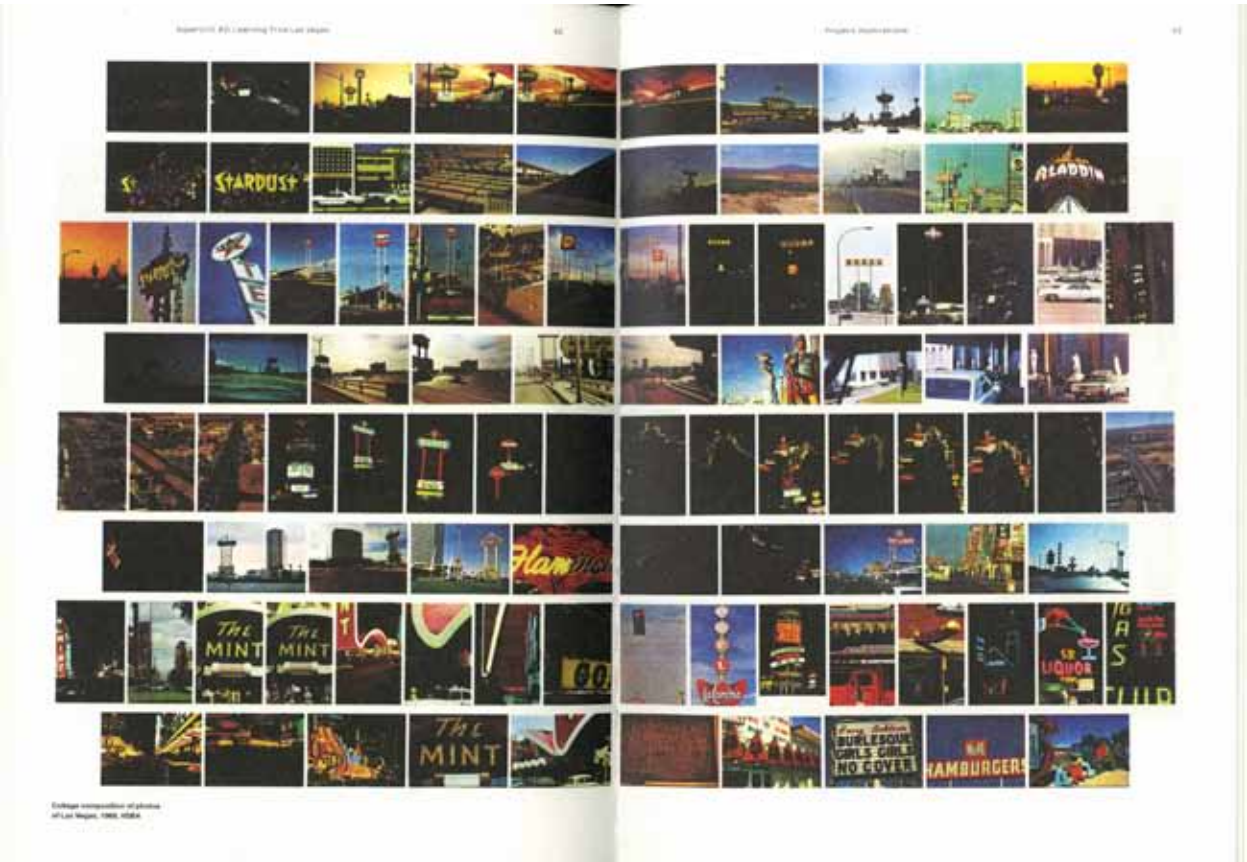

Image 2) Venturi's and Scott Brown's Yale studio learned from Las Vegas as if it was Rome, mapping out objects that did not belong to the conventional architecture canon, such as signs, parking lots, motels, gas stations, and traffic lights. They saw the symbolism of the "popular" architecture of Las Vegas as a challenge to the pure forms of modernism. [2]

Image 3) The Dunes' new freestanding sign and high-rise expansion was simply added to the already existing low-rise structures; it was typical of how resorts expanded during the second building boom. [3]

Image 4) Del Webb bought the Thunderbird in 1964 and added a 560-foot-long sign, the longest on the Strip, which unified the unrelated buildings behind it; it was a lesson it had learned from the Stardust. [4]

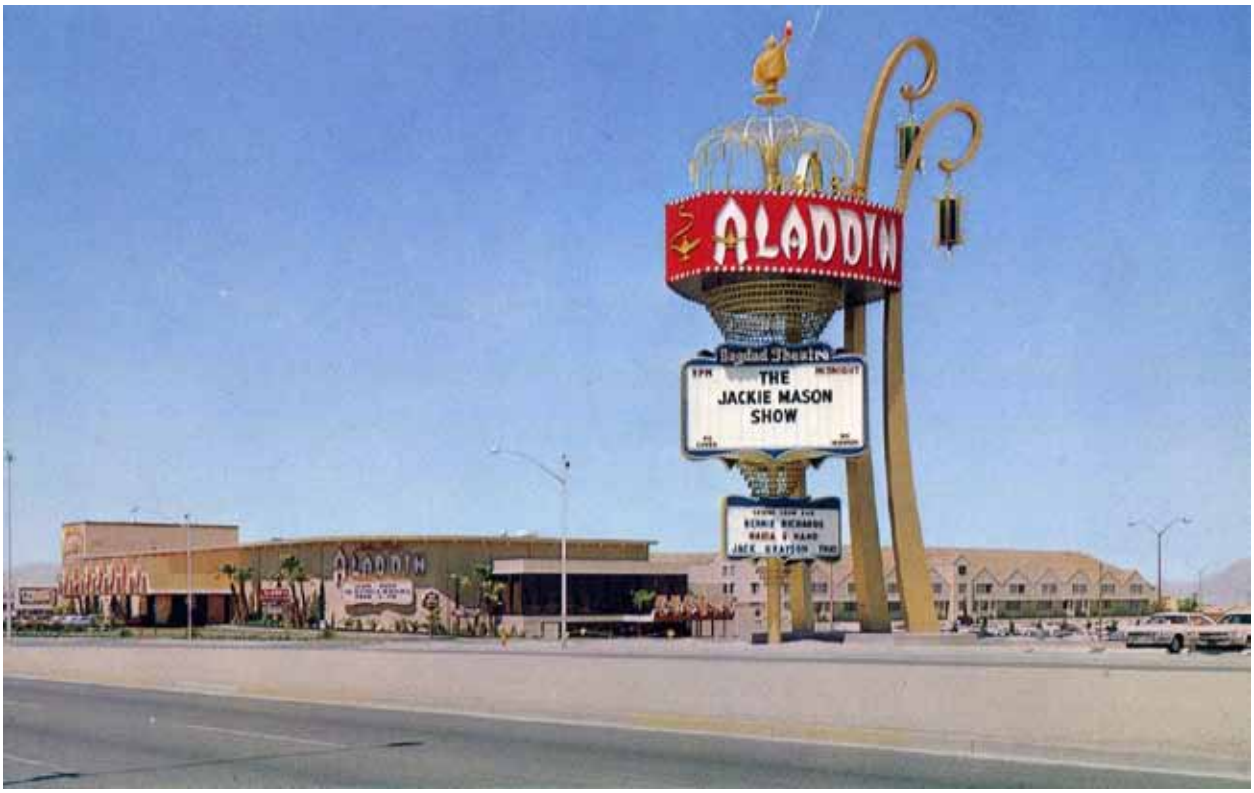

Image 5) Although architect Martin Stern hated the sign that rivaled with his relatively undecorated building, the owner, Milton Prell, loved it. The sculptural three-dimensional sign topped by a lamp expressed the theme of Aladdin, in which a boy is granted wishes by a genie in a lamp. Like the Dunes, Aladdin took its theme from *One Thousand and One Nights*, yet Aladdin's tale was considered even more appropriate to the Strip. [5]

Image 6) Looking north on the Strip, circa 1968, the new 186-feet Frontier sign, the largest in the world, was much taller than all the high-rise expansions. [6]

Image 7) In 1964, the New Frontier was torn down and it re-opened as the Frontier in 1958 with a 650-room addition designed by Rissman and Rissman. Nothing was left from the original Last Frontier structures; even the Last Frontier Village finally closed doors. [7]

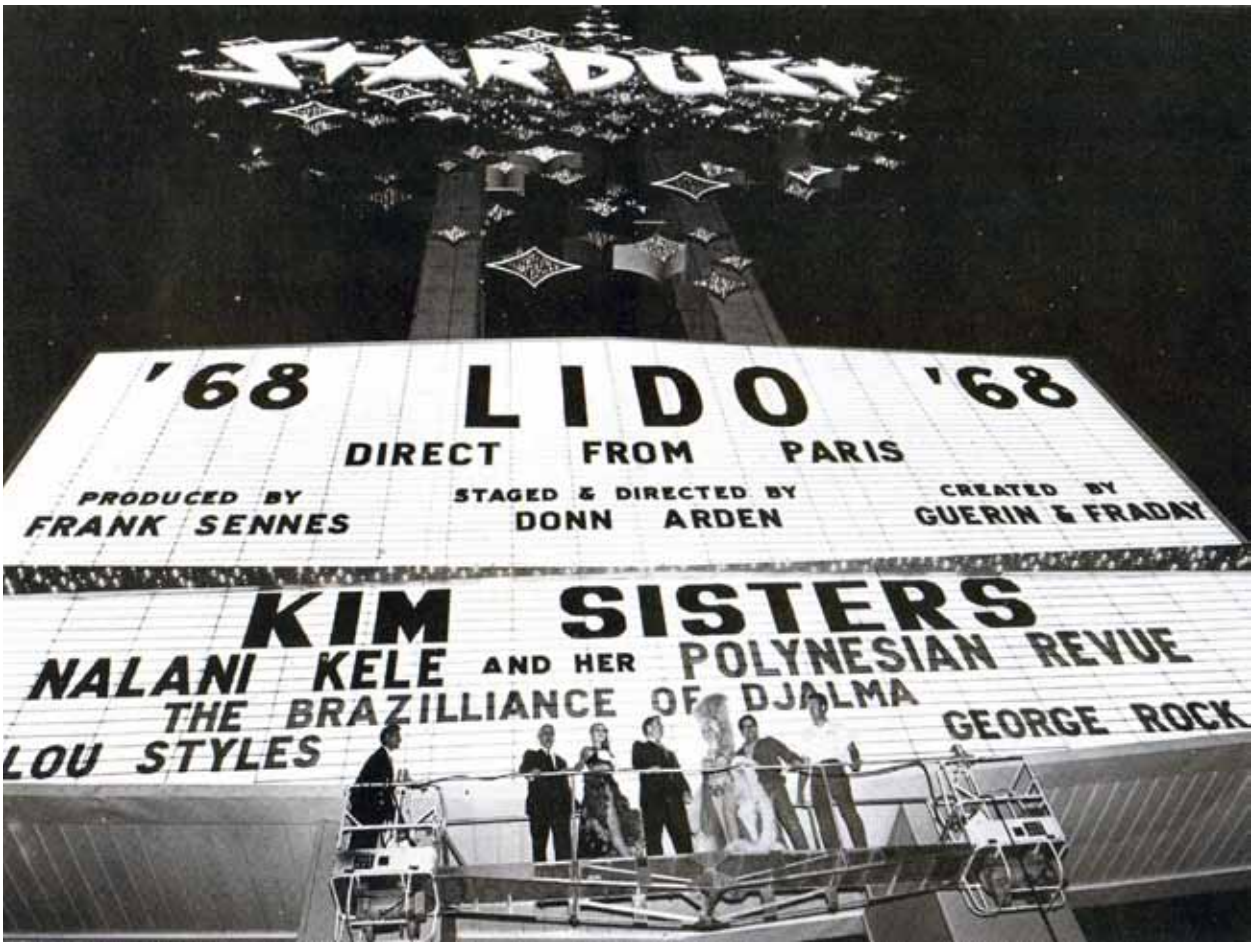

Image 8) Las Vegas Mayor Oran Gragson and a showgirl attended the lighting-up ceremony for the new Stardust sign in 1968. Each new sign was thrown a celebration that was a media event. [8]

Image 9) In addition to the new sign, the Stardust had a new sign façade, topped by an illuminated three-dimensional globe. It replaced the old façade that was already outdated after a decade. [9]

Image 10) Looking north on the center of the Strip, the Dunes, Aladdin, Flamingo, and Bonanza sign can be seen. The 160-room Bonanza Hotel and Casino was a smaller resort that opened in 1967. [10]

Image 11) The Landmark had a long circular shaft with pie-shaped rooms, topped by a saucer. The three-story glass dome contained a casino, lounge, Chinese restaurant, and nightclub. [11]

Image 12) Radically different from other high rises, the Landmark appropriated the sculptural qualities of the sign. Like the revolving “F” logo of the Frontier sign, the building was topped by a turning “L” sign. [12]

Image 13) The history of the Las Vegas Strip is marked by unbuilt resorts as well, many of them even absent from the local archives. For instance, the Viva Hotel, an upward-tapering triangular building with an open atrium in the center, would have been a daring addition to the Strip. [13]

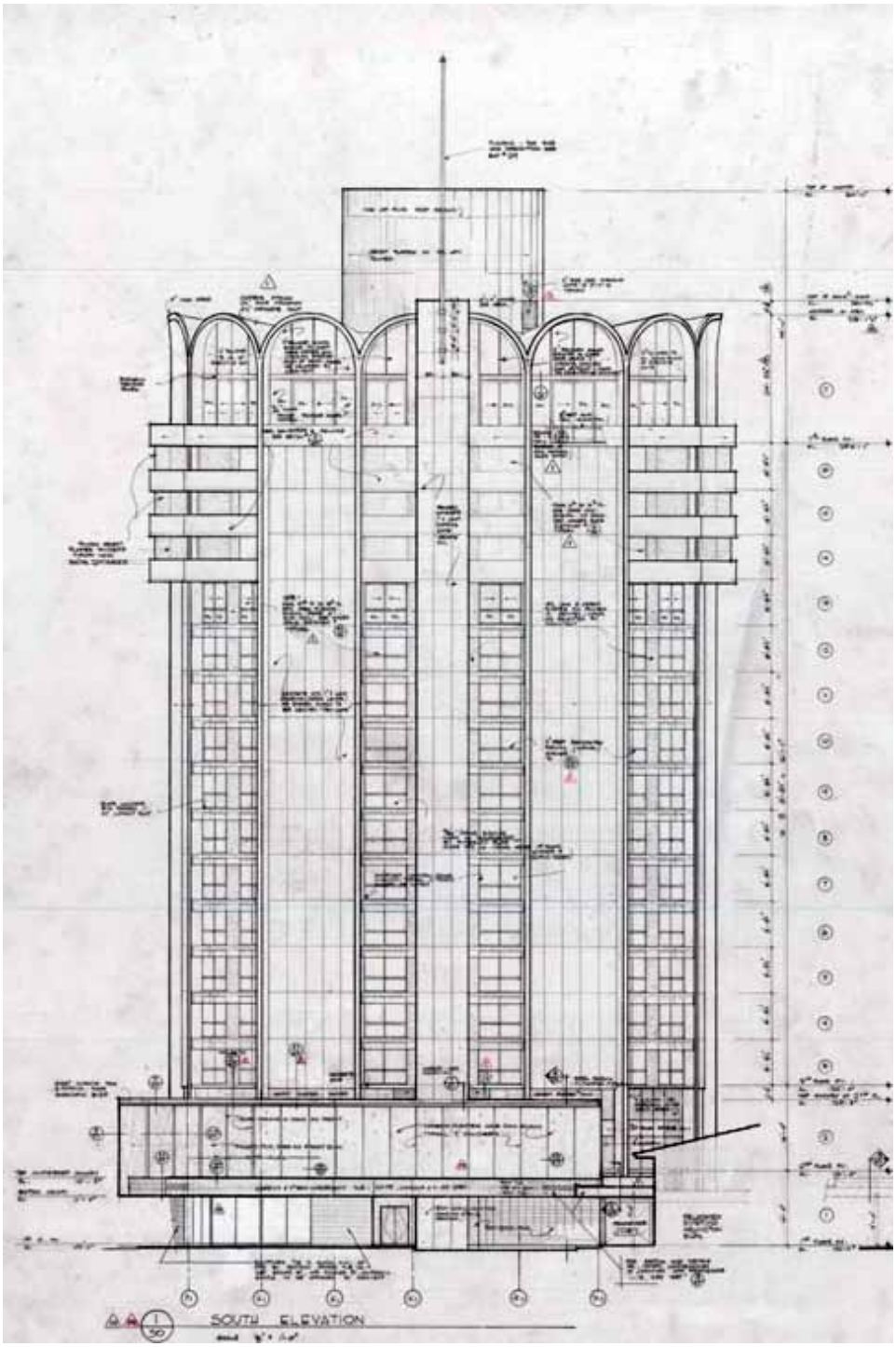

Image 14) Martin Stern designed the cylindrical 1965 Sands addition, adding a sculptural high-rise to the Las Vegas skyline. [14]

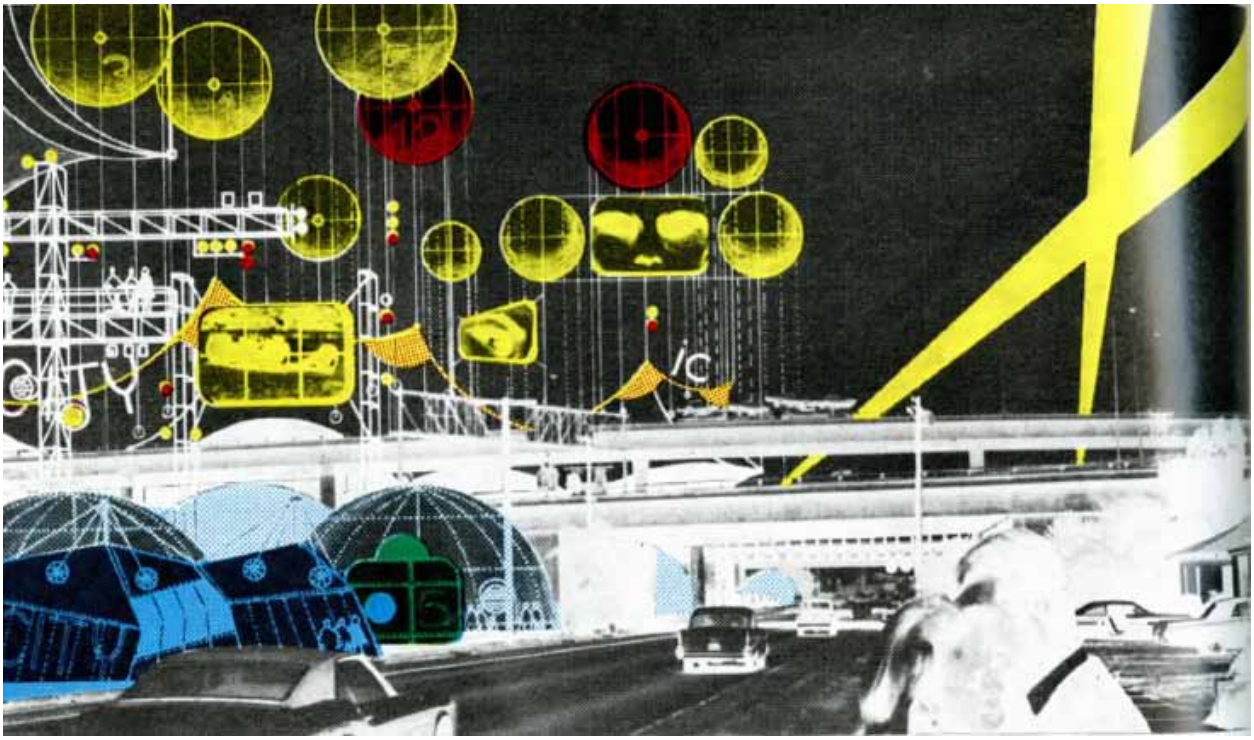

Image 15) Archigram saw the electronically charged Las Vegas almost as an *Pop Cité trouvé*, a version of their desired *Instant City*, were it not for its lack of interaction. [15]

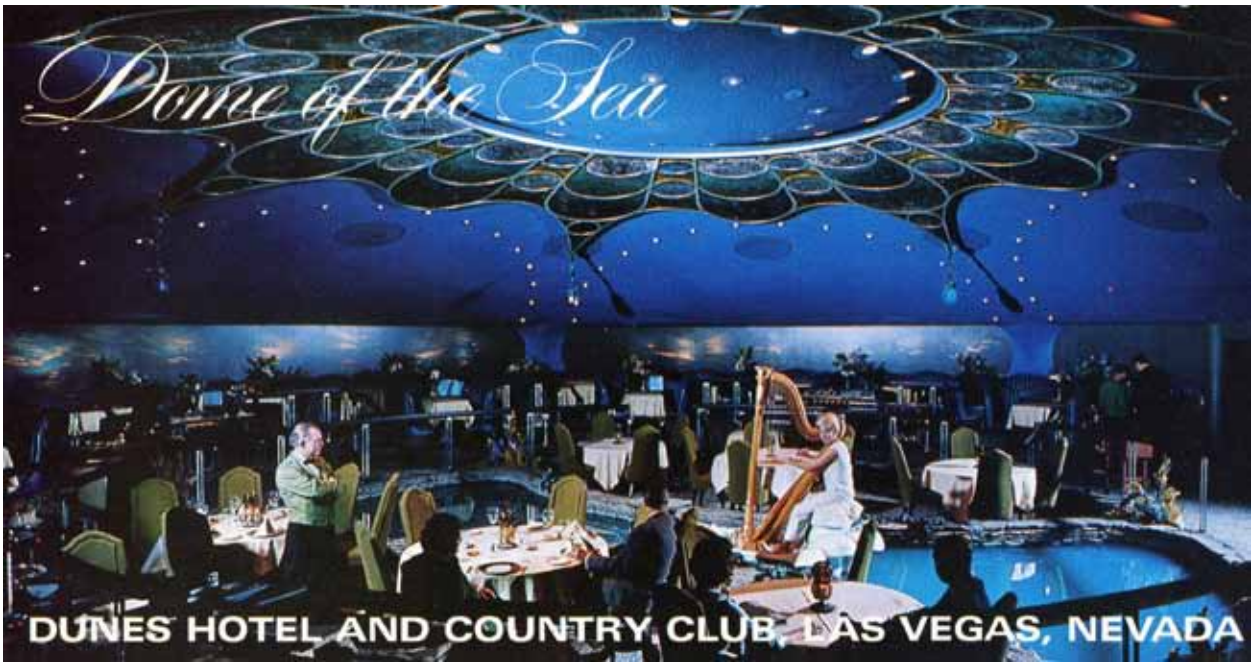

Image 16) The interior of the Dunes' "Dome of the Sea" attempted to transport guest into an real life nautical myth, by projecting underwater scenes onto the walls, and circling a harpist a on a figure-eight track in a shallow pool. "O, seafaring traveler … heed the ageless call of the mysterious sea … submit to the pleasures of the nautical kingdom – this Dome of the Sea – and gently please, to the seascapes in music of our Mermaid and her Harp. Sample of the boundless delicacies that man has wrested from the great seas since time began, or those culinary delights shared in the great feasts of King Arthur's day," states the postcard. [16]

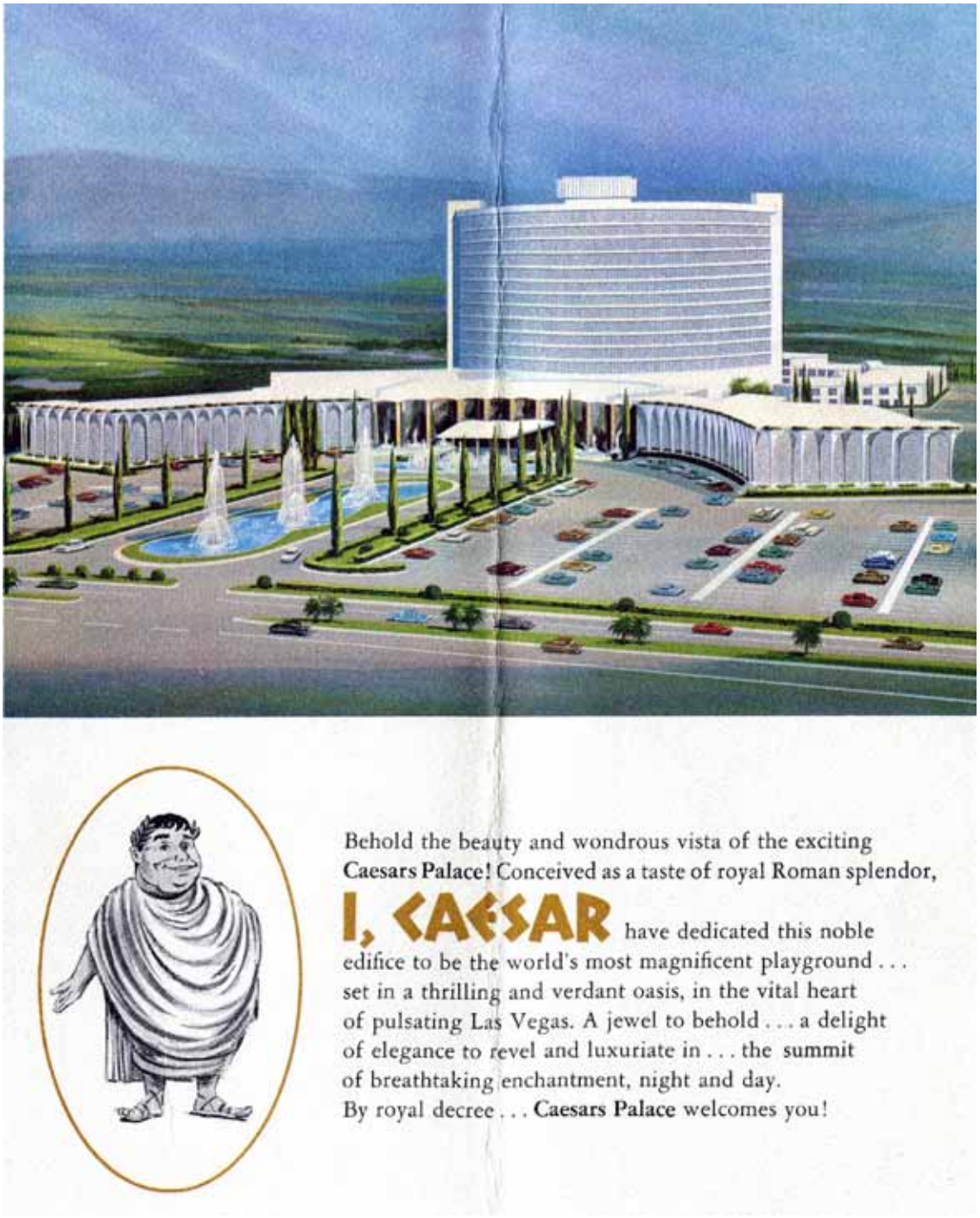

Image 17) Everything in Caesars Palace was made to fit the theme, "royal Roman splendor". Even the brochure was made to look like worn Roman parchment, and the inaugural invitations were presented as scrolls. "I believe very strongly that when you select a theme for a hotel, you ought to follow that theme in every aspect of the operation where it is possible to do so," said Jo Harris, one of Sarno's main designers. "Even your stationery, for instance, ought to bear out the theme." [17] [18]

Image 18) The Caesars Palace sign functioned on two levels. The fiberglass Roman figures on the bottom appealed to pedestrians, while the Ionic columns and the architrave were meant to attract drivers. [19]

Image 19) Unlike other resorts, Caesars Palace extended the theme all the way from the sidewalk to the casino by adding a monumental entrance lined with cypresses, fountains, and statues. [20]

Image 20) Low-rise wings embraced the entrance that was inspired more from Baroque than classical Rome. [21]

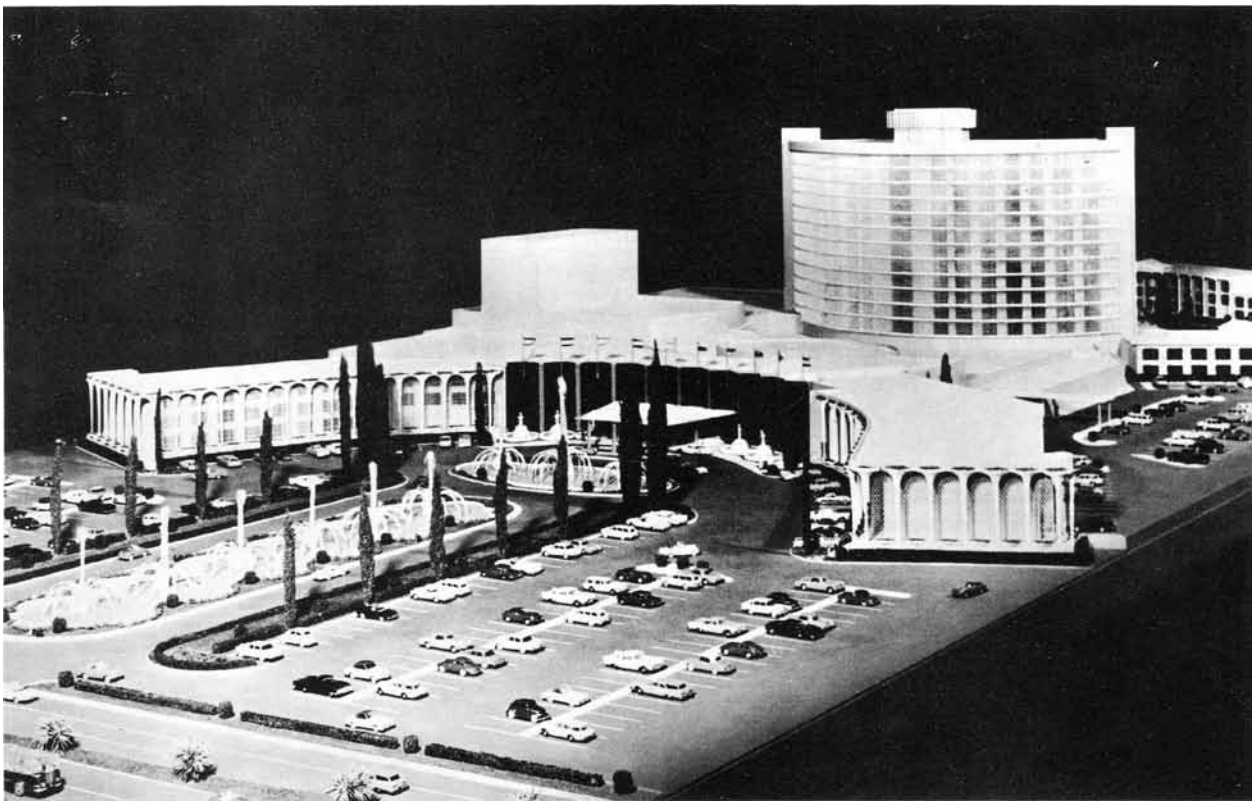

Image 21) Although Caesars had a high-rise tower, the low-rise motor-court typology was still predominant. [22]

Image 22) The fountains of Caesars Palace put Evel Knievel into a 29-day coma, yet they nonetheless turned him into a celebrity. [23]

RAPE OF THE SABINES, by Giovanni Bologna; completed in 1583. The classic marble masterpiece was inspired by the machination of Romulos, when he invited the naive citizens of a neighboring tribe to participate in a Roman festival. When they arrived, the Roman warriors, desperately in need of wives, captured and fled with the Sabine women. The war between the Romans and the Sabines gradually subsided and ended in a union between the two peoples. This classic sculpture, reflecting the horror of the attack upon the women, now stands in the Palazzo Vecchio, in Florence, Italy.

VENUS DE MILO, by an unknown sculptor, is one of the most famous of all artistic achievements, and is believed to have been carved about 200 B.C. This magnificent work depicting the Goddess of Love and Beauty is considered to be the most superbly definitive symbol of femine grace and form. The original occupies a place of great prestige at the Louvre Museum, in Paris, France.

VENUS, by Antonio Canova, completed about 1800, shows the lovely Goddess just as she has stepped from the sea. The suppleness of form and the flow of line in this distinguished piece of art contributed to the recognition earned by Canova as the greatest Italian sculptor of the 18th century. Another of his famous works is the statue of Napoleon's beautiful sister, Paolina Borghese. Canova's Venus stands in the Uffizi Gallery, in Florence, Italy.

BACCHUS, by Michaelangelo, completed during the 15th century, represents the Greek God of Wine, and was commissioned by a collector of antiques. For many years it remained in the courtyard of the antique collector and was not immediately recognized as the work of the man considered to be the most masterful and talented of all sculptors. When it was learned Michaelangelo had carved the Bacchus, the statue was moved to the National Museum, in Florence, Italy.

HEBE, by Adrian de Vries, carved dur
16th Century, is a lovely representation
daughter of Zeus and Era. Lithe and
exquisitely feminine, this work has a
great distinction as an example of classi
ture, and is owned by a private collector.

DAVID, by Michaelangelo, completed
15th Century, is regarded as the great
second most celebrated work, the most
being his Pieta. The statue of David, you
of the Hebrews, shows him as a young, str
just after he has slain the giant, Goliat
masterpiece captured the ethereal beauty
young boy's face, and the remarkable stat
carved directly from one large block of
marble. The original is kept at the Galler

Image 23) Caesars Palace produced a museum-like brochure that featured the scaled replicas of the carefully chosen statues at the resort, including the Rape of the Sabines, Venus de Milo, Venus, Hebe, David, and Bacchus. [24]

Image 24) Caesars Palace extended the theme deep into the resort's interior, by decorating blue painted walls with Ionic columns and architraves in the casino, and using a replica of Cleopatra's Barge as a floating lounge. [25]

Image 25) The man on the Caesars Palace logo bore a close resemblance to Sarno, a perfect example of the relaxed proletariat Tom Wolfe referred to. [26]

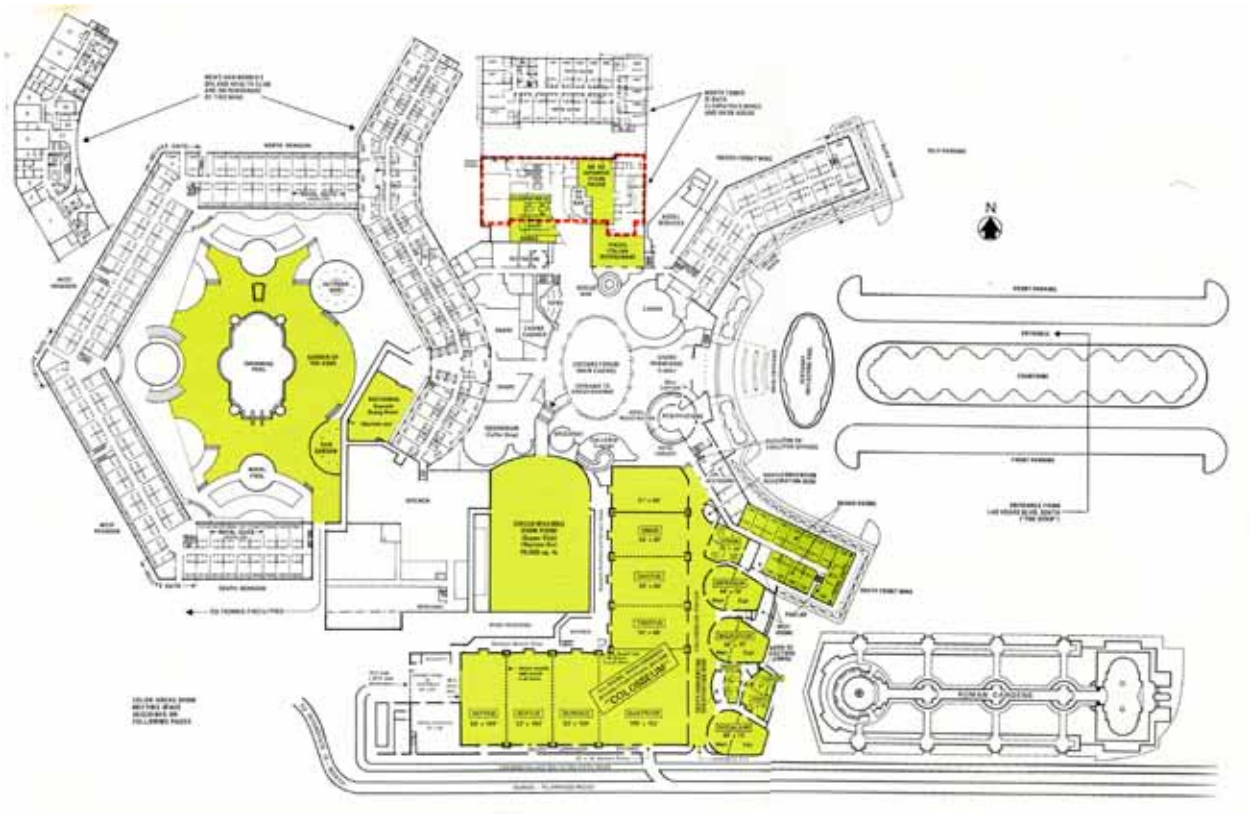

Image 26) Sarno thought ovals were “relaxing”, and so the reflecting pool and the casino were oval shaped. [27]

Image 27) Jay Sarno, sitting at Bachannal Restaurant, also wanted to evoke the decadence of Ancient Rome. Waitresses were trained to respond “Yes, master” to orders, and walked around feeding grapes and wine to guests. After the main course, patrons could enjoy a neck and shoulder massage. [28]

Image 28) “Goddesses” from Caesars Palace wait at the airport for guests, holding a sign, “I am your slave.” [29]

Image 29) Sarno also planned to build a high-rise with hotel rooms behind the casino of Circus Circus' big top, but could not arrange the financing. [30]

Image 30) Five color-changing fountains stood in a 306-foot-long pool in front of Circus Circus' big top, in addition to a YESCO designed sign that doubled as a carousel for Circus Circus. After Sarno left, they were replaced with another casino, "Slots-A-Fun", and parking lots. [31]

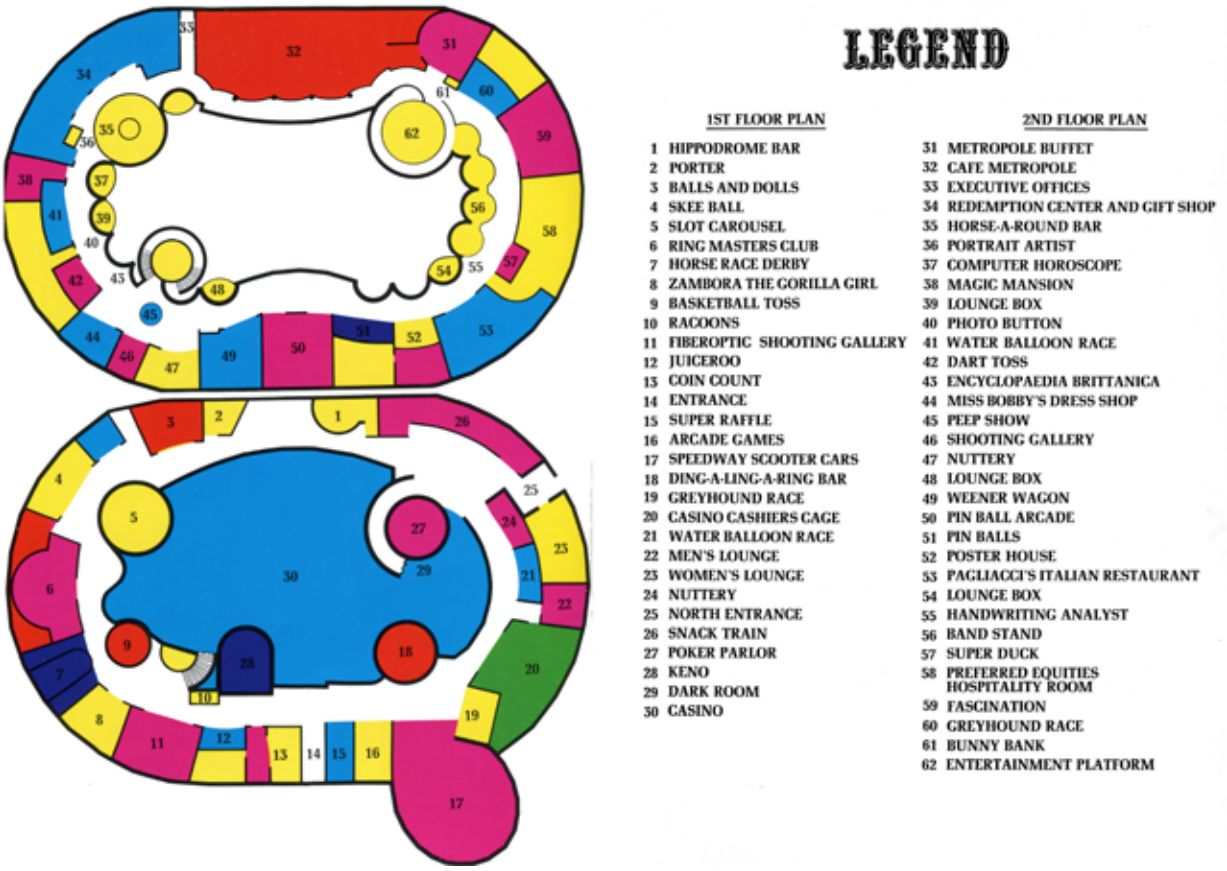

Image 31) Circus Circus was even more themed, and a function of the oval, than Caesars Palace. Among other attractions, it hosted a pinball arcade, greyhound race, basketball toss, computer horoscope, portrait artist, handwriting analyst, and Zambora the gorilla girl. [32]

Image 32) Inside the casino, live performers and the Horse-Around Bar, a revolving cocktail lounge equipped with horses, added to the circus atmosphere. [33]

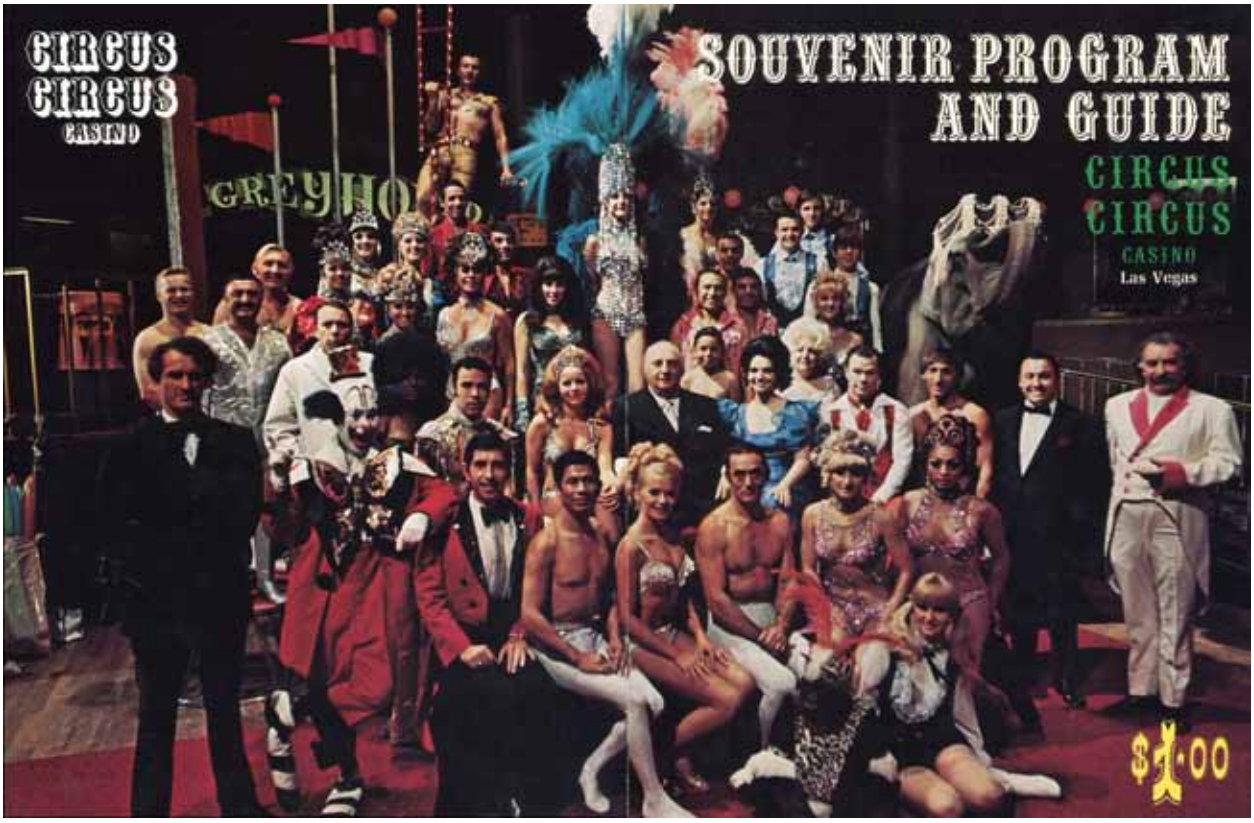

Image 33) Jay Sarno, out of frustration with expensive entertainers, came up with the theme of the circus. Circus acts, including Tanya the elephant, were much cheaper than prominent stars. [34]

Image 34) Circus acts unfolded right above the casino floor. Here leaps acrobat Joe Gerlach 65 feet into a 5-by-9-foot sponge. [35]

Image 35) “Acrobats at the Circus Circus casino cheat death above the anxious gamblers defying debt below,” stated Life magazine. Circus Circus was a difficult place for a serious gambler. [36]

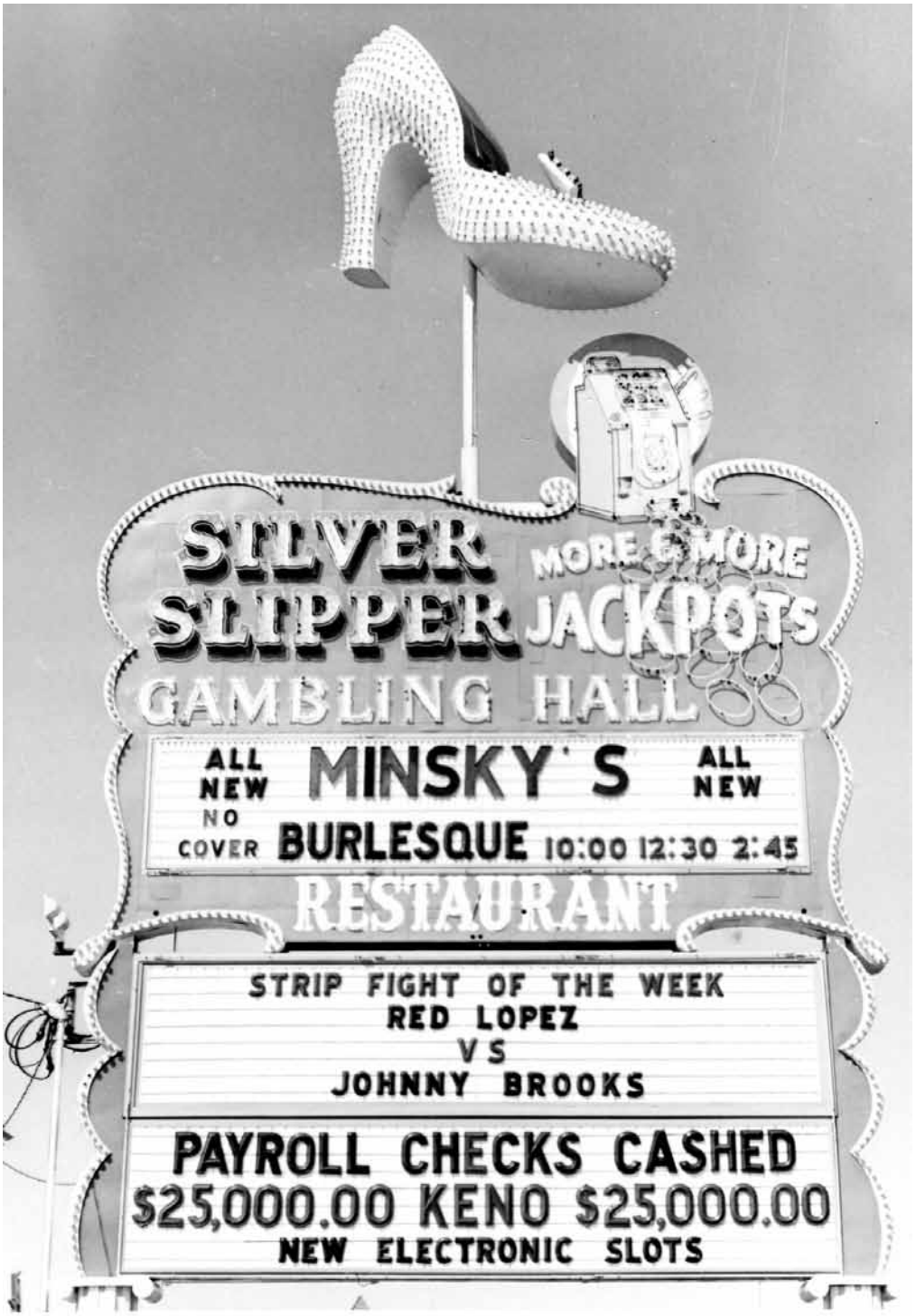

Image 36) Because the revolving Silver Slipper sign interrupted his sleep, Howard Hughes bought the Silver Slipper and had the sign filled with concrete. It was an early symptom of how corporations would iron out the eccentricities of the Pop City era. [37]

Image 37) The billboard appeared overnight in 1972 when it was announced that Hughes had left the Bahamas for an unknown destination. Locals knew the message was cynical, since the owner of the billboard, Hank Greenspun, was taking Hughes to court in a $142 million slander of title suit involving some 2,000 acres. [38]

Image 38) The International Hotel was situated next to the Las Vegas Convention Center, opposite the Landmark, one block off the Strip on Paradise Road. It is likely the convention center played a role in the international and corporate look of the new resort. [39]

Image 39) Kirk Kerkorian stands in front of the International Hotel construction. Before construction documents were fully drafted, the building was already under construction. As a result, the largest resort in the world was built in only 18 months. [40]

Image 40) The International was even more secluded than other resorts. The tower and the recreational facilities were elevated on a podium deck that further separated the resort from the street. [40]

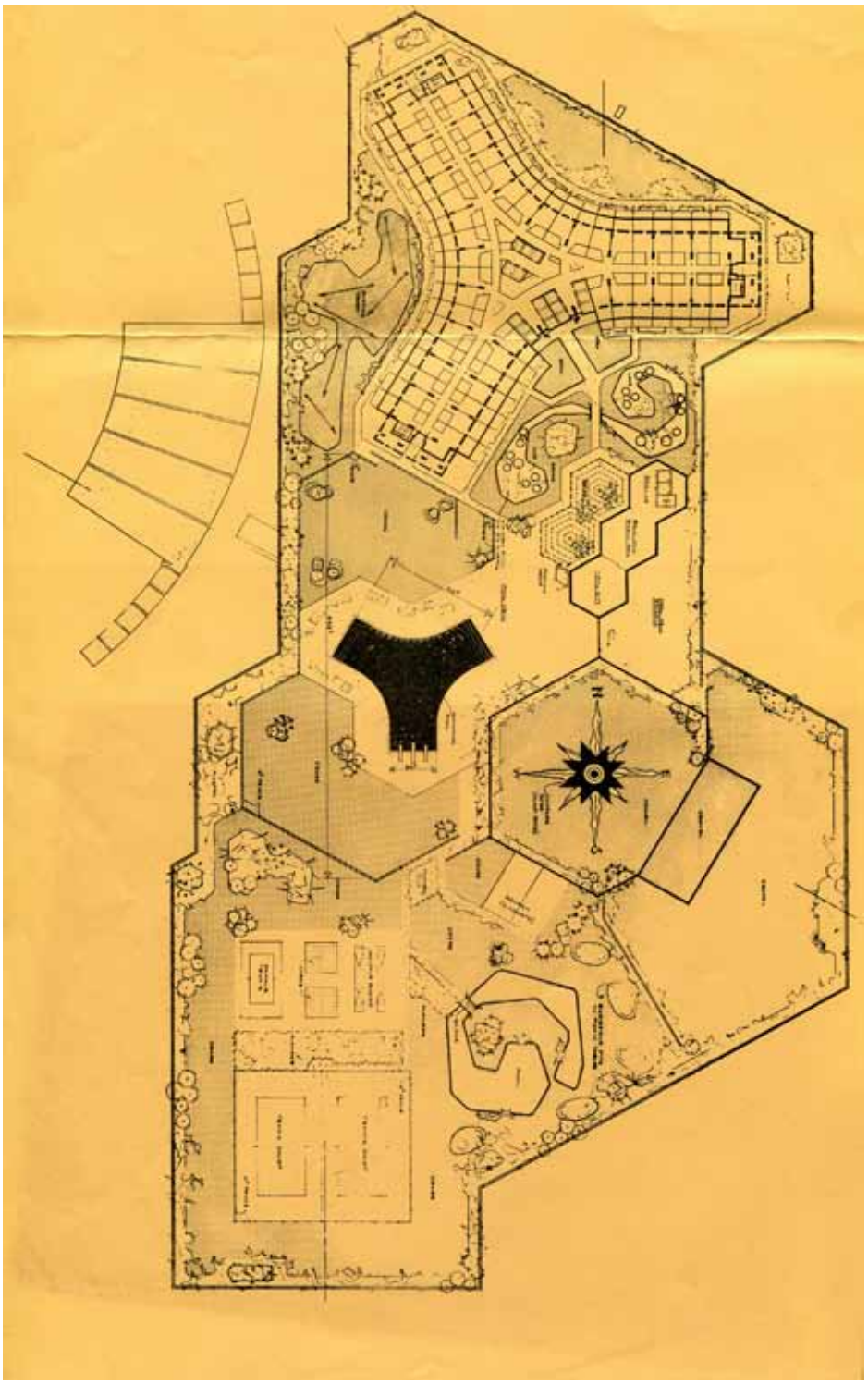

Image 41) The International was the first modern megaresort in which the hotel, convention, theatre, casino, and recreational spaces, except for parking, were integrated in a single unifying structure. Effectively it was a high-rise podium typology. [42]

Image 42) The idea was to replicate the megaresort in miniature for expansion; in reality, the building was elongated. However, future resorts would take over a similar strategy, by doubling the structure in order to expand. [43]

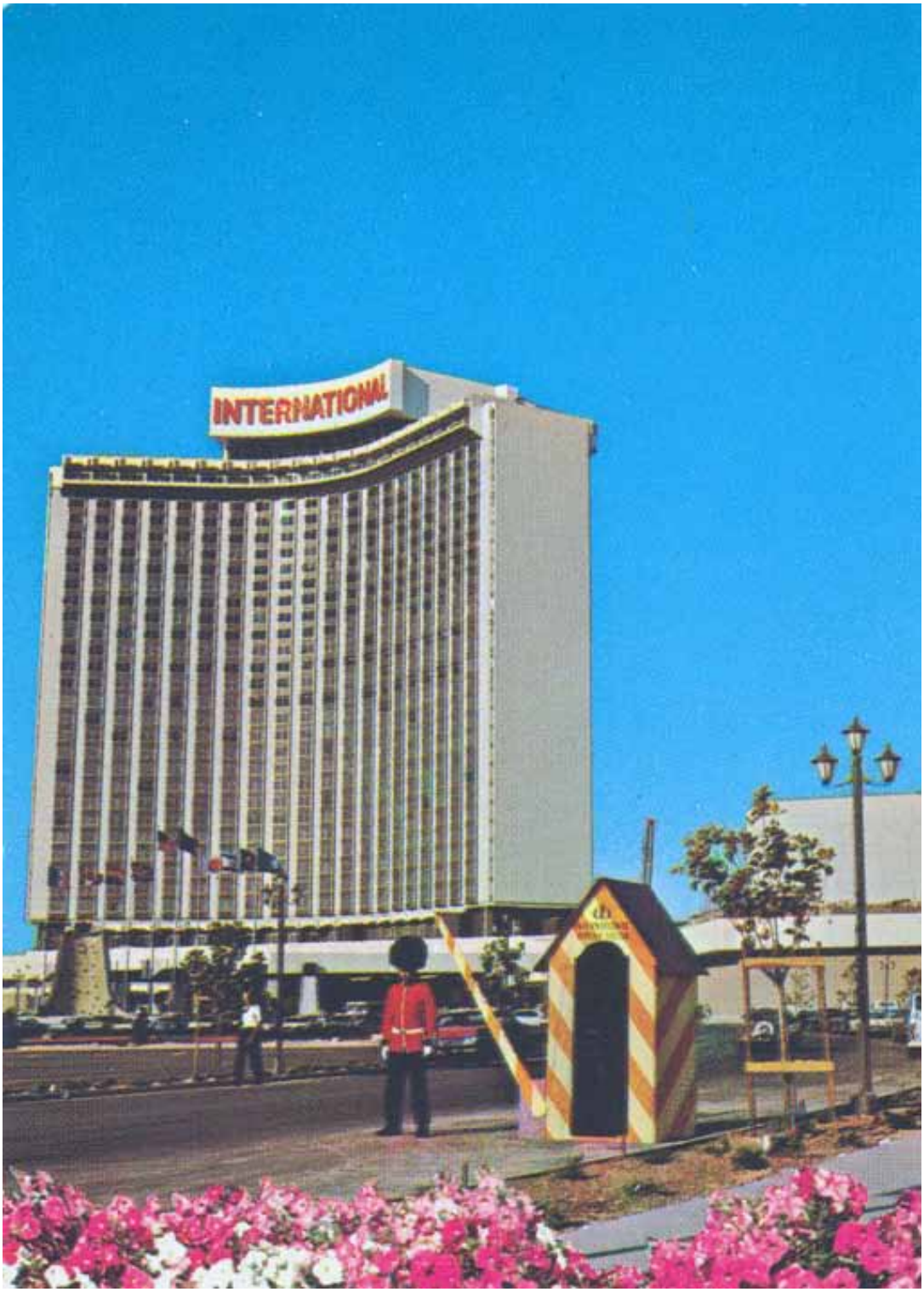

Image 43) Guests received a “passport” when they registered in this “international style” themed resort. [44]

Image 44) Kerkorian had bought MGM Studios and modeled the resort after the 1932 movie *Grand Hotel*. He continued the tradition of building on the synergy between the movie and the resort industry, with the difference that he moved from resorts to film; it was a reversal of earlier days when theatre magnate Griffith had built the Last Frontier. [45]

Image 45) The porte-cochere of the MGM Grand celebrated the ritual of arrival, much like a Hollywood movie premiere. [46]

Image 46) The MGM Grand discontinued the sign race when it built a relatively small and unimaginative sign; it was the revenge of architectural mass over the sign. [47]

Image 47) With the MGM Grand, the porte-cochere became the focal point of the resort. Besides marking the main entrance, it connected to the two major theatres. [48]

Image 48) The Las Vegas Strip, circa 1980. On the far right the MGM Grand is visible. Its enormous set back from the Strip accommodated surface parking, while further isolating the resort. [49]

Image 49) Eighty-five people died in the MGM Grand Hotel fire of 1980, the second worst hotel fire in modern U.S. history. The fire spread easily because of a lack of sprinklers in the casino and restaurants, exempted by lenient county officials. It added to the economic slump on the Strip. [50]

Image 50) Gas stations, souvenir shops and motels fed off the new masses reeled in by corporations, while adding to the sea of whiteboard signs and billboards on the Strip. [51]

Image 51) “Las Vegas,” by Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard managed to photograph an empty billboard, revealing the “emptiness” of hyperreal Las Vegas.

Endnotes

[1] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[2] "Collage composition of photos of Las Vegas," from *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, published in 1972.

[3] Image taken from the Dunes brochure. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[4] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[5] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[6] Postcard of the Strip, circa 1968. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[7] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[8] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[9] Postcard. Courtesy of Nevada State Museum Archives.

[10] Postcard of the Las Vegas Strip, circa 1969.

[11] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[12] Postcard. Courtesy of Nevada State Museum Archives.

[13] Copyright Chicago Art Institute.

[14] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[15] Cook, Peter, Ron Herron, and Dennis Crompton. 1969. Instant City. *Architectural Design,* May.

[16] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[17] Hopkins, A.D. 1997. Jay Sarno: He Came to Play. In Sheehan, Jack ed. *The Players: The Men Who Made Las Vegas*. Reno: University of Nevada Press.

[18] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[19] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[20] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[21] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[22] Model of Caesars Palace. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[23] Photograph in 1967. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[24] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[25] Brochure of Caesars Palace depicting interior scenes. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[26] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[27] Floor plan of Caesars Palace. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[28] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[29] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[30] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[31] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[32] Circus Circus floor plans. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[33] Courtesy of UNLV Special Selections.

[34] Circus Circus Souvenir Program and Guide. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[35] 1968. *Life Magazine*, November 29.

[36] 1968. *Life Magazine*, November 29.

[37] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[38] "Welcome Home, Howard" billboard, 1972. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[39] Site plan of the International Hotel. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[40] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[41] Drawing by Martin Stern. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[42] Floor plan of the International Hotel. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[43] Postcard of the International Hotel including future expansion. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[44] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[45] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[46] MGM Grand Hotel brochure. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[47] Postcard. Courtesy of Nevada State Museum Archives.

[48] Drawing by Martin Stern. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[49] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[50] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[51] Postcard of the Las Vegas Strip, circa 1980. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

Images Chapter Four
Theme Park: The Disneyfication of the Strip (1985 – 2000)

Image 1) Where a swimming pool, lawn, fountain, or neon sign once sufficed, the Mirage used a theme-park-like feature as the new attention-getter. [1]

Image 2) An amalgamation of real, fake, and mummified plants and trees was used to create a sanitized and “better” tropical jungle inside the Mirage. [2]

Image 3) Steve Wynn, Siegfried and Roy, and their white tiger stand in front of the Mirage. The Mirage was completely family friendly; instead of nude shows it had white tigers and dolphins. [3]

Image 4) Overtly competing with Disney for guests, the Excalibur resembled Disneyland's Cinderella Castle. [4]

Image 5) The turrets of the “castle within a castle” scheme were deliberately over-scaled to match the hotel towers proportionally, making the Excalibur appear even more cartoonish. [5]

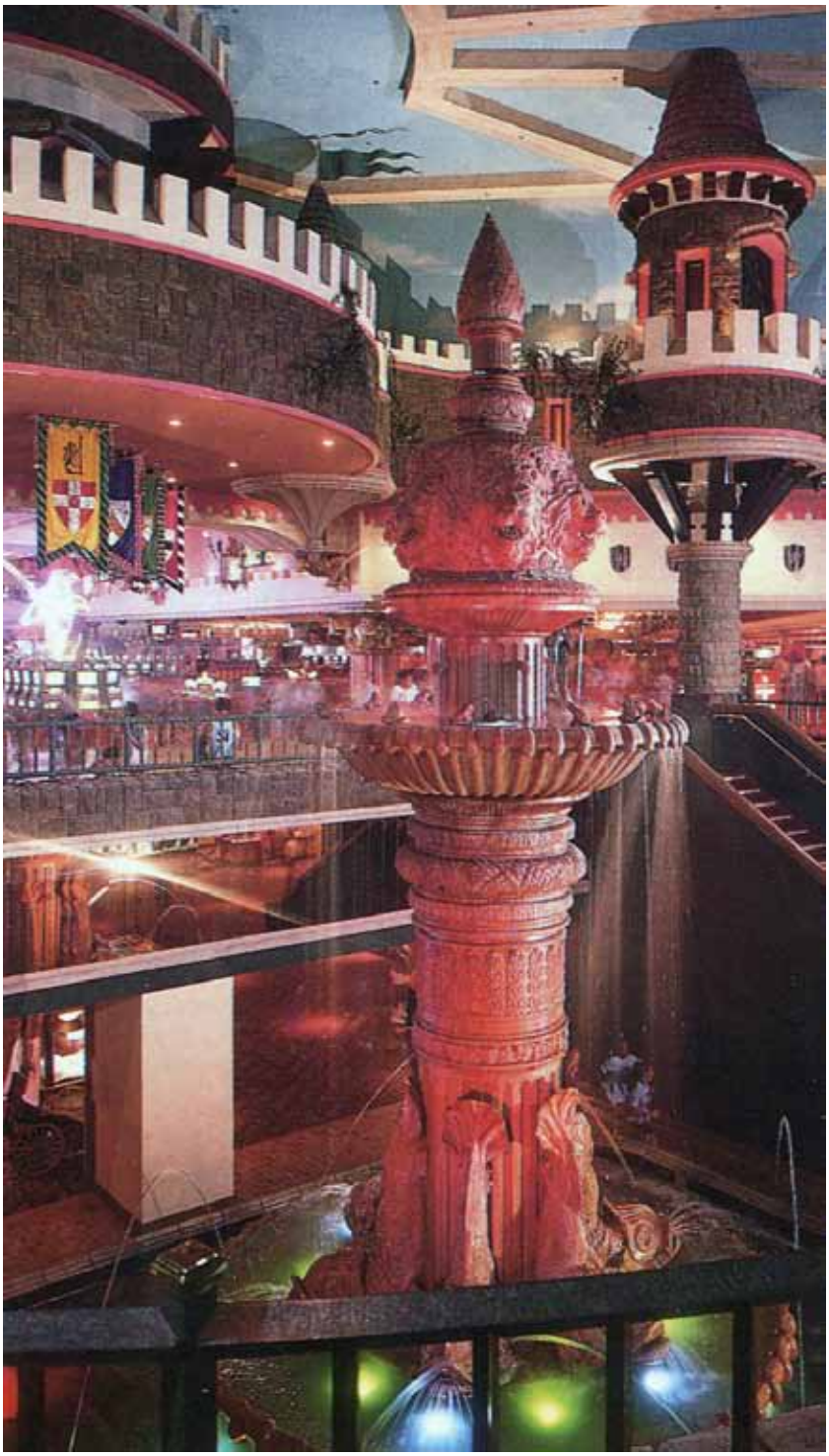

Image 6) Even inside the Excalibur, exterior medieval scenes were built. A 33-foot-high multicolored fountain stood below a blue painted ceiling in the atrium of the Excalibur. [6]

Image 7) Yates Silverman reproduced a medieval “street” of faux facades inside the Excalibur. [7]

Image 8) Blurring retail with entertainment, Dougall Design Associates designed a color-changing faux blue sky and Roman statues that came to life every hour at the Forum Shops.

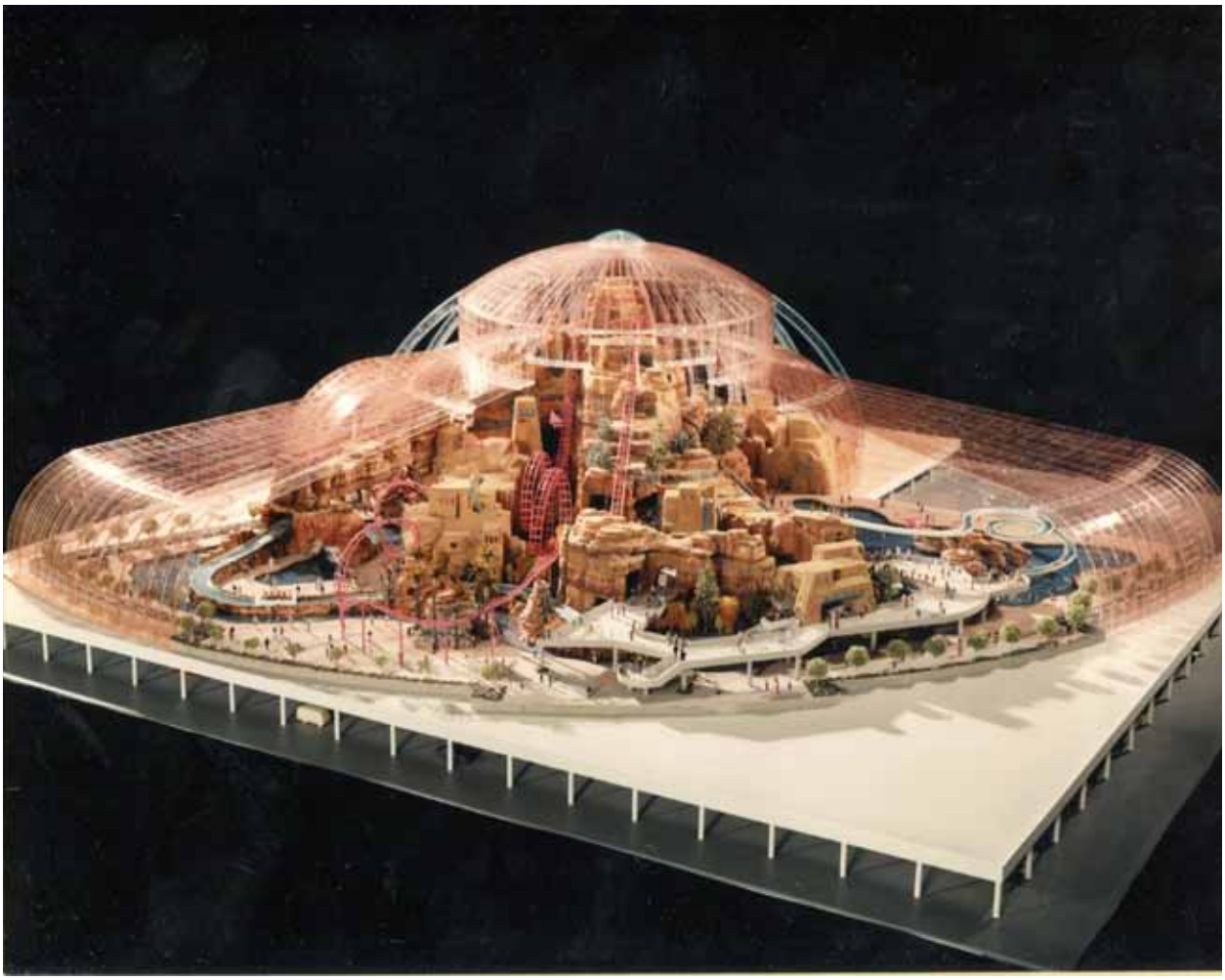

Image 9) After the Last Frontier Village had long closed doors, Circus Circus introduced another theme park to the Strip, the Grand Slam Canyon, housed in a 150-foot-tall pink space-frame dome. The five-acre theme park featured the world's only indoor double-loop, double-corkscrew rollercoaster. [9]

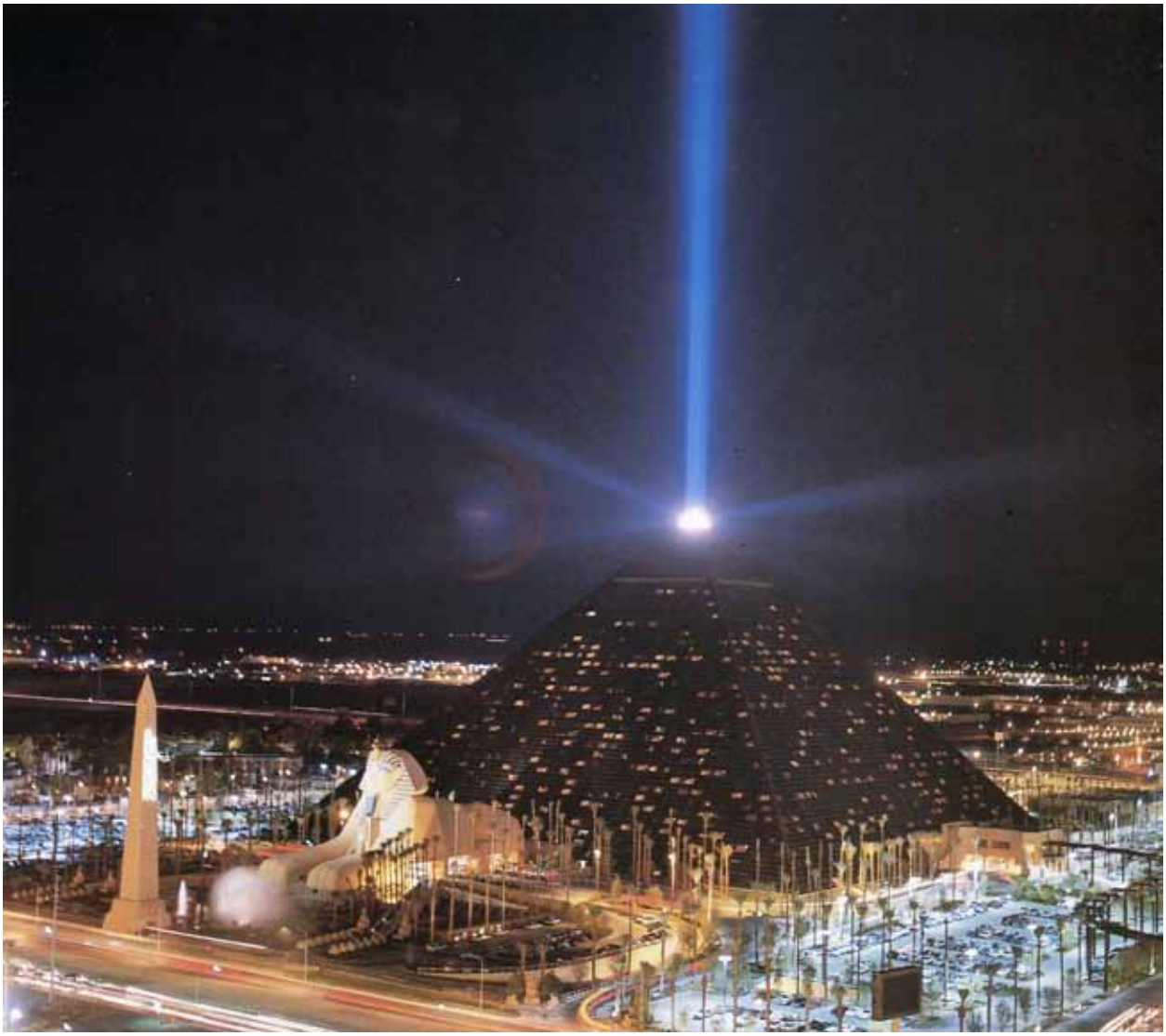

Image 10) The black glass pyramid of the Luxor Las Vegas shot a laser beam, reportedly the brightest light in the world, up to 10 miles into outer space. It was a step up from the automobile light than once shone from the Sultan of the Dunes turban. [10]

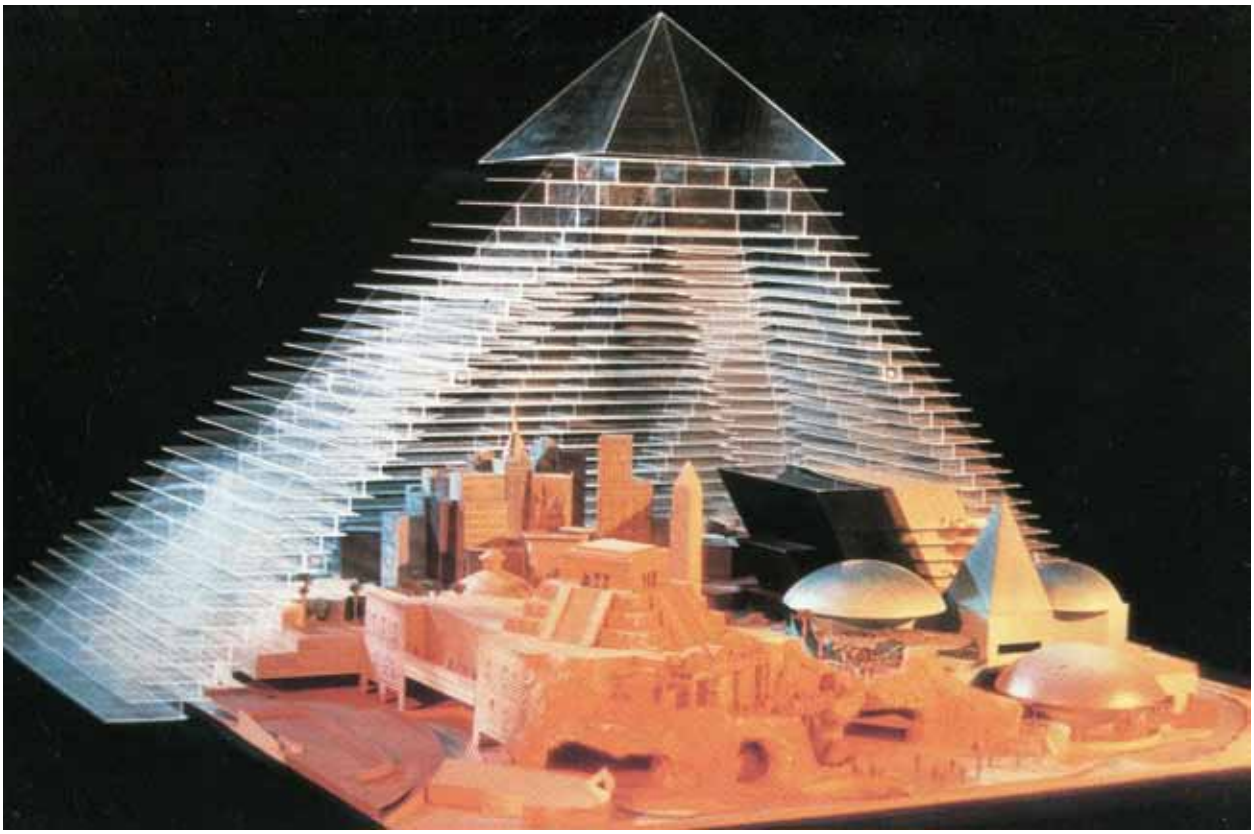

Image 11) A cutaway model of the Luxor reveals that, unlike other resort typologies that organized hotel rooms on double loaded corridors, the rooms in the Luxor looked out over a giant atrium, a famous suicide spot on the Strip. [11]

Image 12) Yates Silverman designed “authentic copies” of Egyptian hieroglyphs and ornaments inside the Luxor. [12]

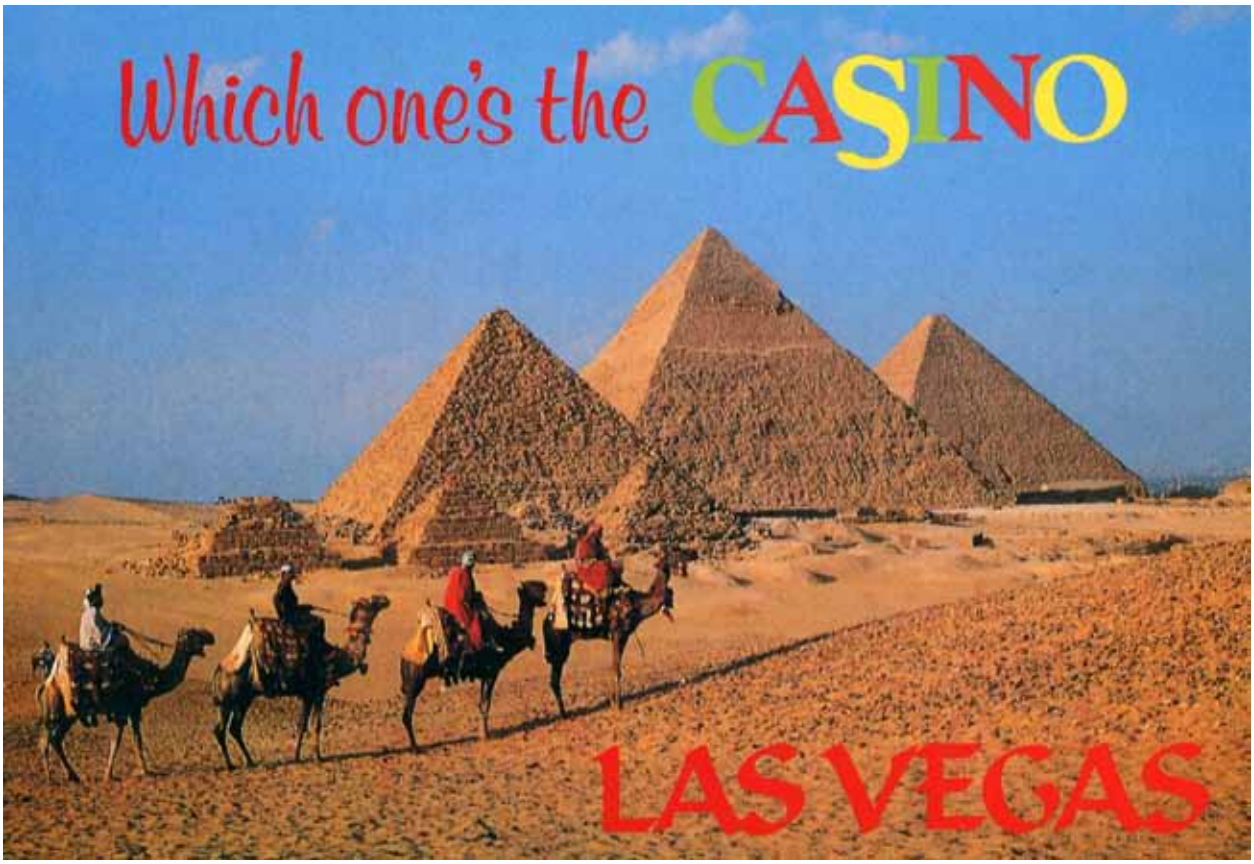

Image 13) The postcard of the Pyramids of Giza plays out the hyperreal situation in which the copy, Luxor Las Vegas, had become the frame of reference for the original, the pyramids in Egypt. [13]

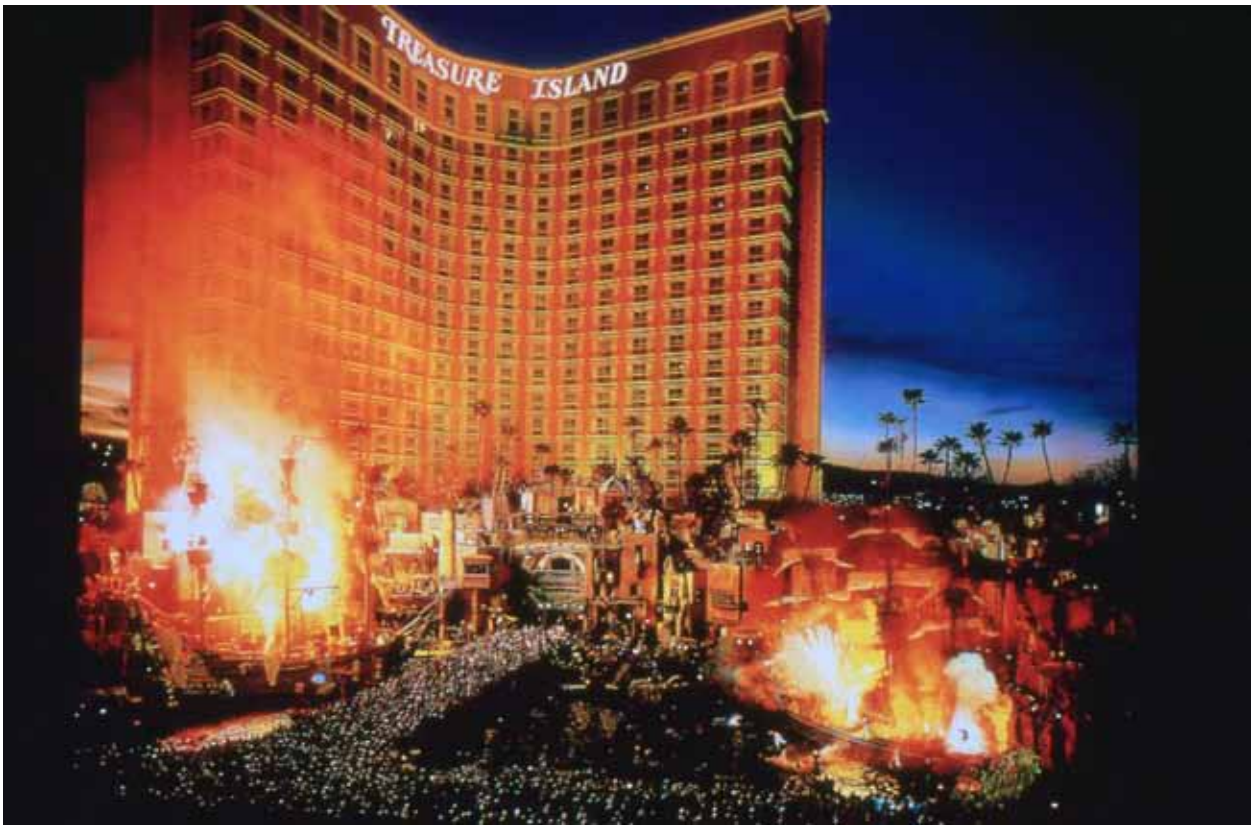

Image 14) With the fully “Imagineered” Battle of Buccaneer Bay at the Treasure Island, Wynn tried to outdo Disney. Unlike Disneyland, however, people were steered into the resort after the show. [14]

THEMING BRINGS 'EM IN

No doubt about it! Many Hotels/Casinos, Restaurants, and Retailers have increased success with themed environments. Theming attracts customers!

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Image 15) Scenic Technologies, a construction company, provided specialist services for the engineering, fabrication, automation, and installation of themed environments; experts and designers alike fully supported the new theming paradigm.

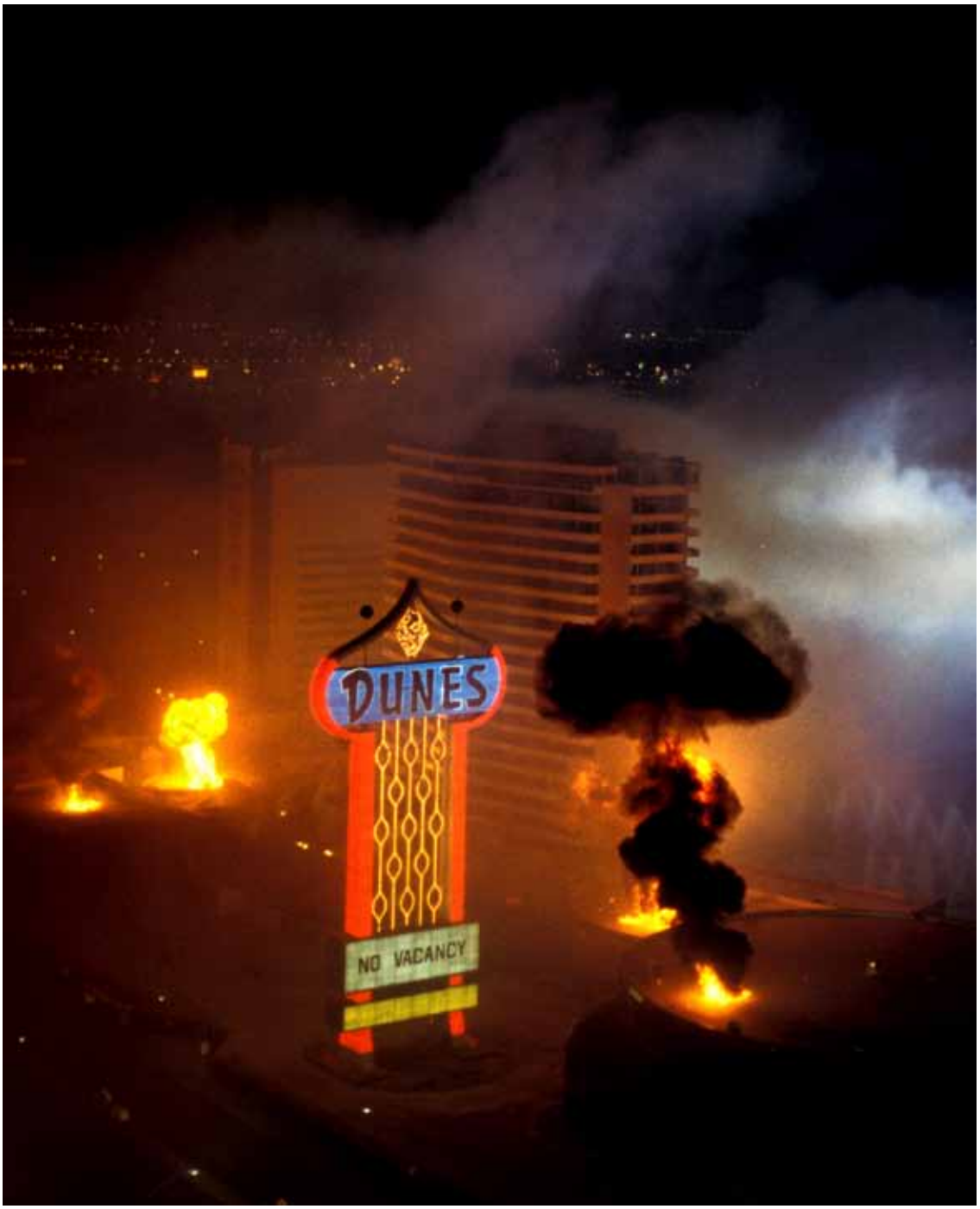


Image 16) The Disney era on the Strip reached its symbolic peak when the Dunes and its sign, which once epitomized the Pop City era, were obliterated from cannons shot from Treasure Island, a fully Disney Imagineered resort. The shift provoked nostalgia, however; some people took offense to the Dunes sign spelling “No Vacancy” for the occasion of the implosion. [15]

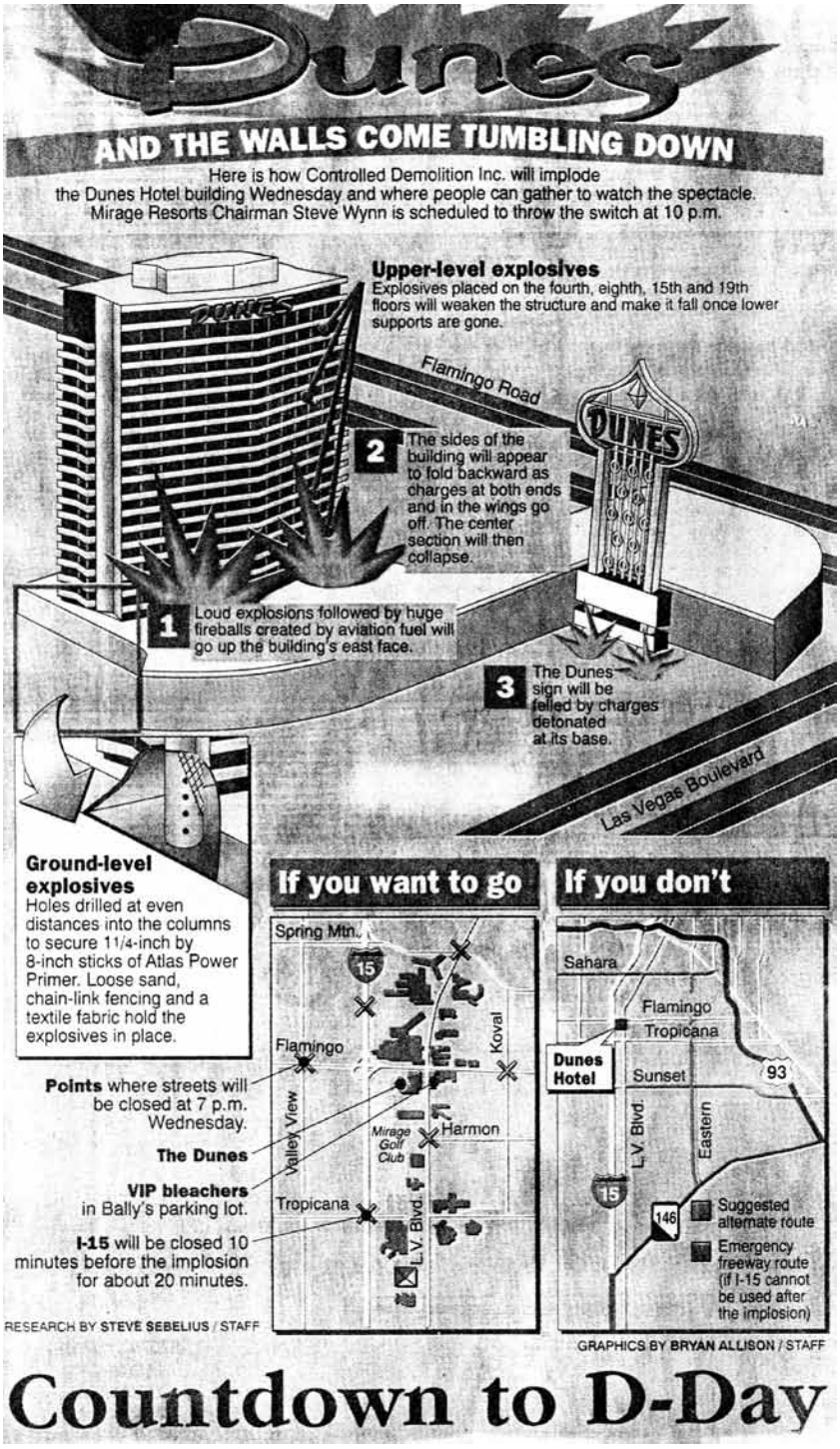


Image 17) With a special edition for "D-Day" in the *Las Vegas Sun*, most Las Vegans eagerly anticipated the fully choreographed implosion of the Dunes.

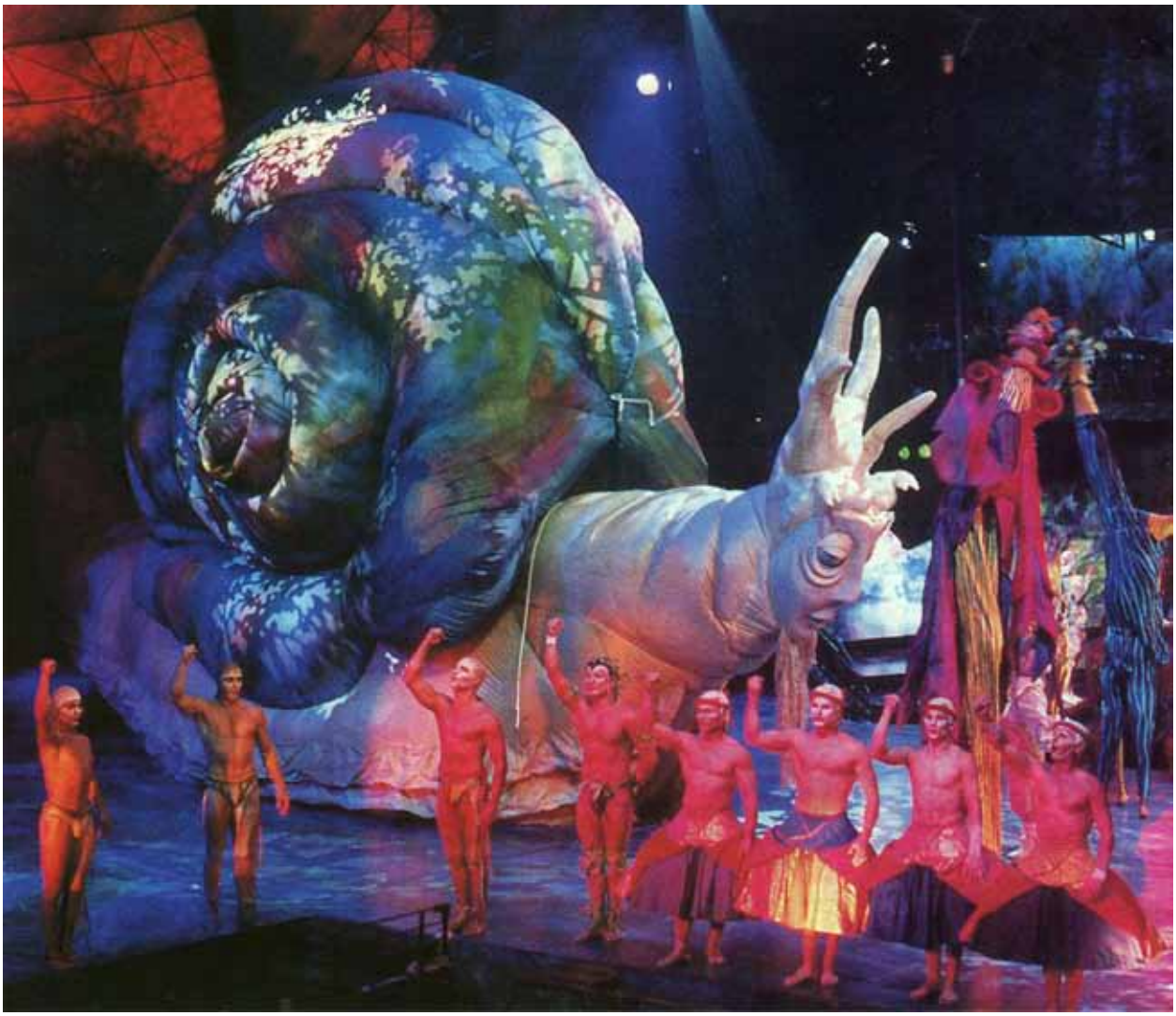


Image 18) Cirque de Soleil was given a permanent home at Treasure Island. The critically acclaimed theatre company would only increase its presence on the Strip; since it does not rely on language, it was more accessible to foreign visitors than Broadway shows. [16]

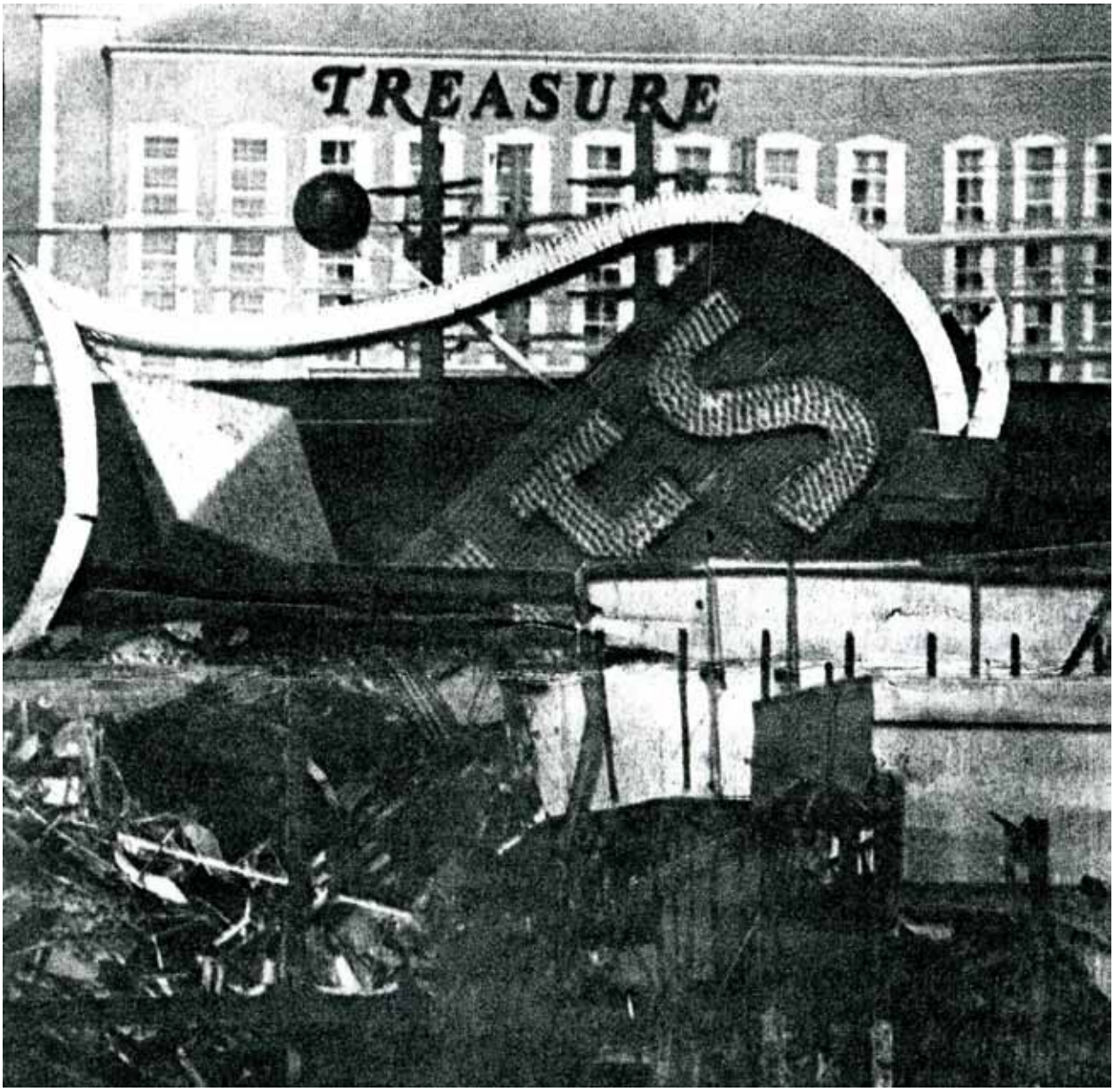


Image 19) In the aftermath of D-Day the defunct Dunes signs lies in front of Treasure Island, symbolizing the victory of the new Disney paradigm. The implosion of the Dunes sparked a debate on historical preservation on the Strip; however, architectural preservationist had no say in the future of the Strip. [17]

Image 20) Symbolic of the new pedestrian nature of the Las Vegas Strip, where once there were parking lots at the old MGM Grand, Bally Entertainment Corporation added a people mover to reel in the crowds. It was designed by YESCO, the company that previously would have been commissioned for road signage. [18]

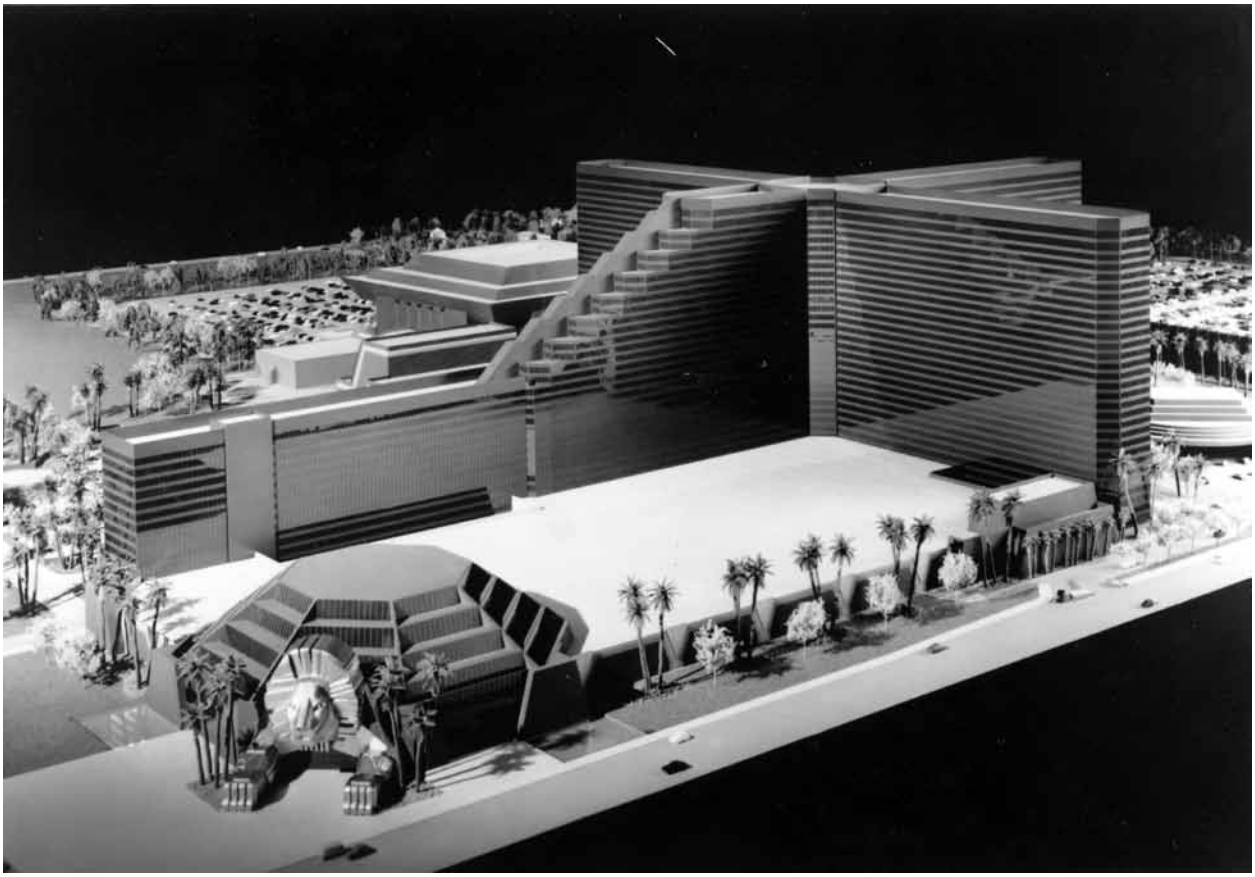


Image 21) Even the model of the new MGM Grand was huge; it measured 200 square feet. Five thousand rooms were organized in an x-shaped tower complex, which could contain more rooms than a Y-shape yet sacrificed room views. [19]

Image 22) The MGM Grand Garden, a 15,200-seat event arena, was physical evidence of the fact that entertainment had come to play a much bigger role on the Las Vegas Strip. [20]

Image 23) From the outside, the emerald color of the façade and the lion head entrance attested to the Wizard of Oz theme of the MGM Grand. [21]

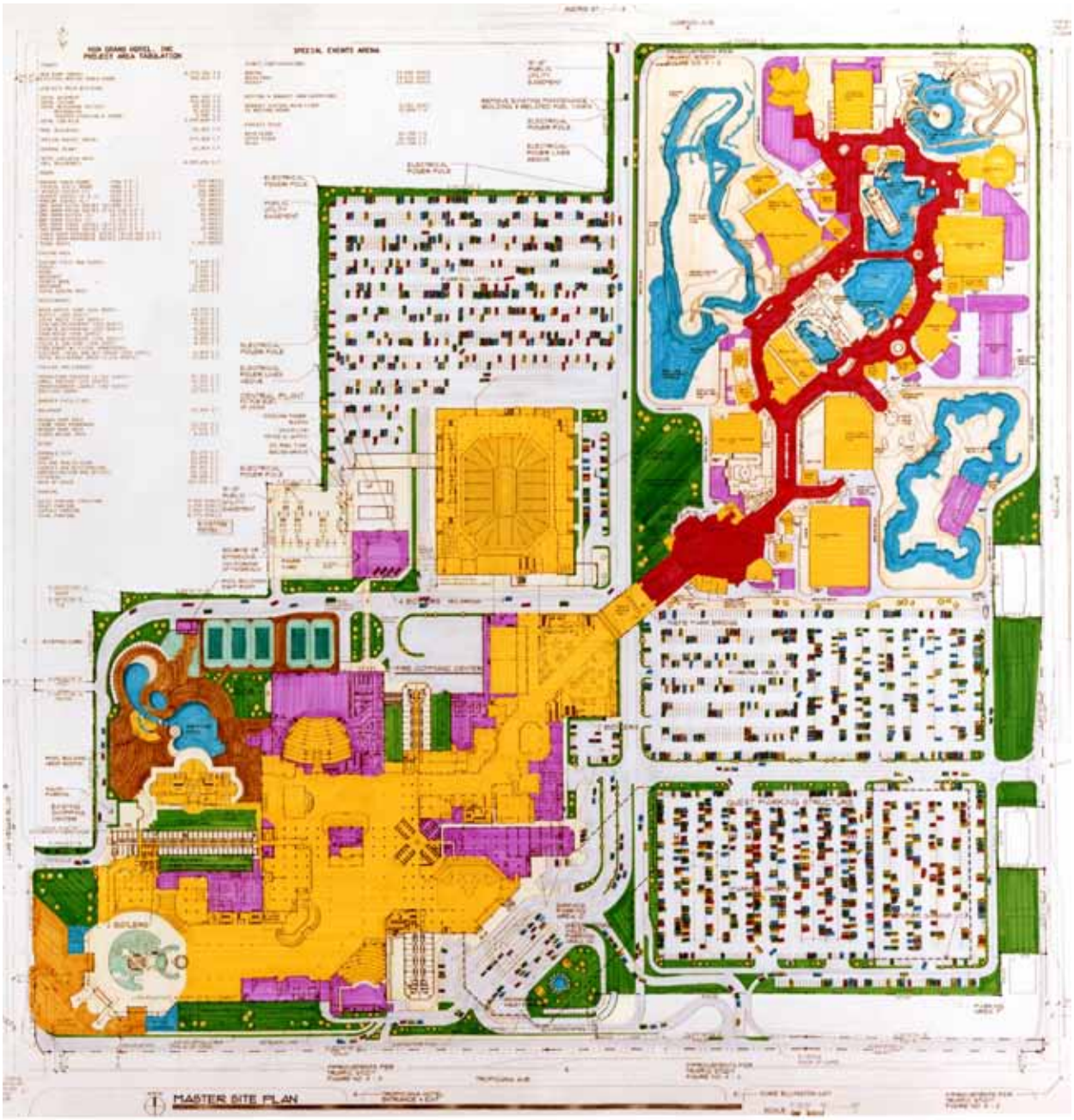


Image 24) Although the theme park (above right) was larger than the casino (below left), the entrance to the theme park was still through the casino. [22]

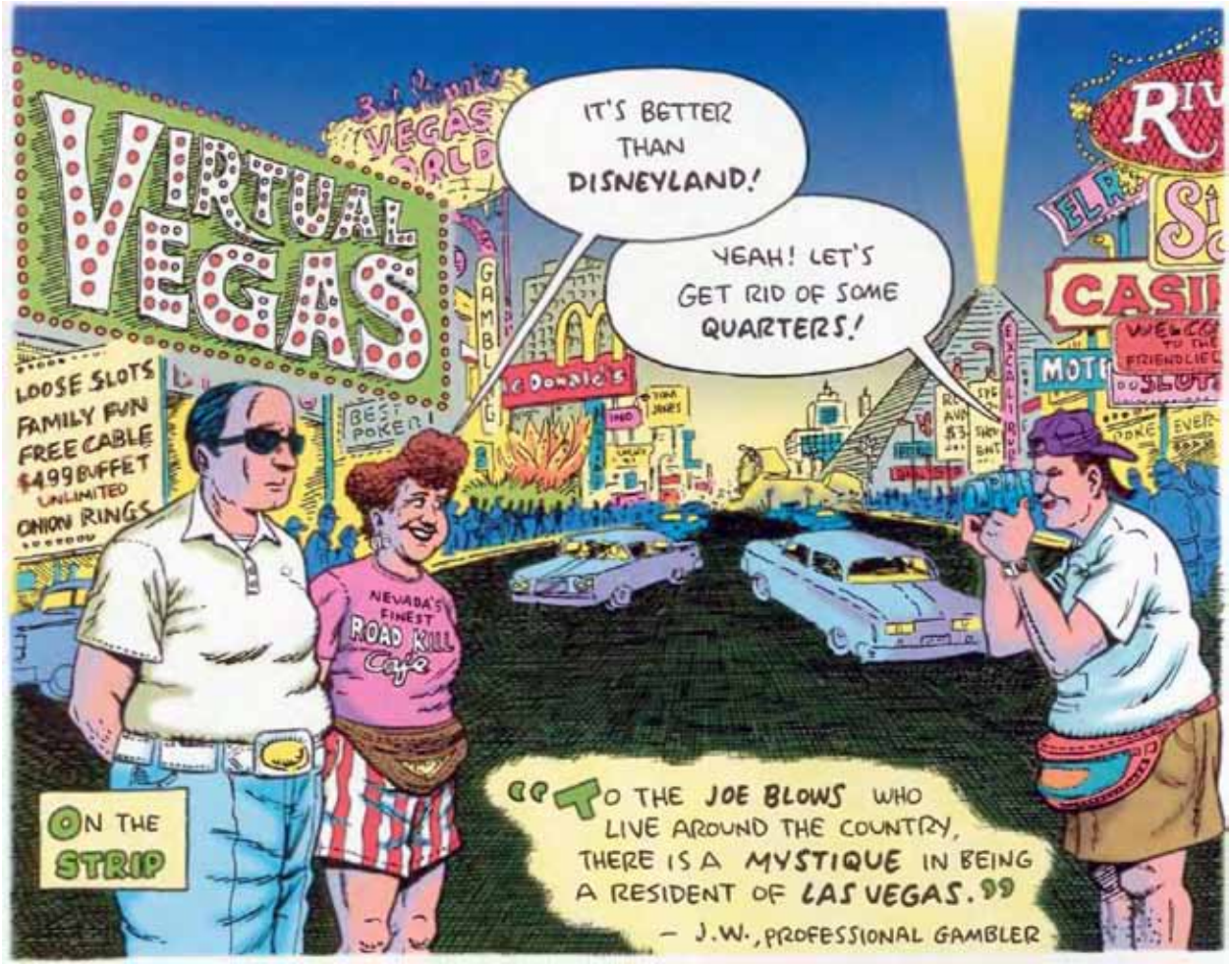


Image 25) In the "Virtual Vegas" comic published in *The New Yorker*, July 11, 1994, Bill Griffith depicted the new demographic of "Joe Blows" on the Las Vegas Strip. Marc Cooper had described them as "this herd of beefy middle Americans, almost all dressed in short pants, T-shirts and baseball caps, and enough of them wearing those pastel-colored fanny packs."

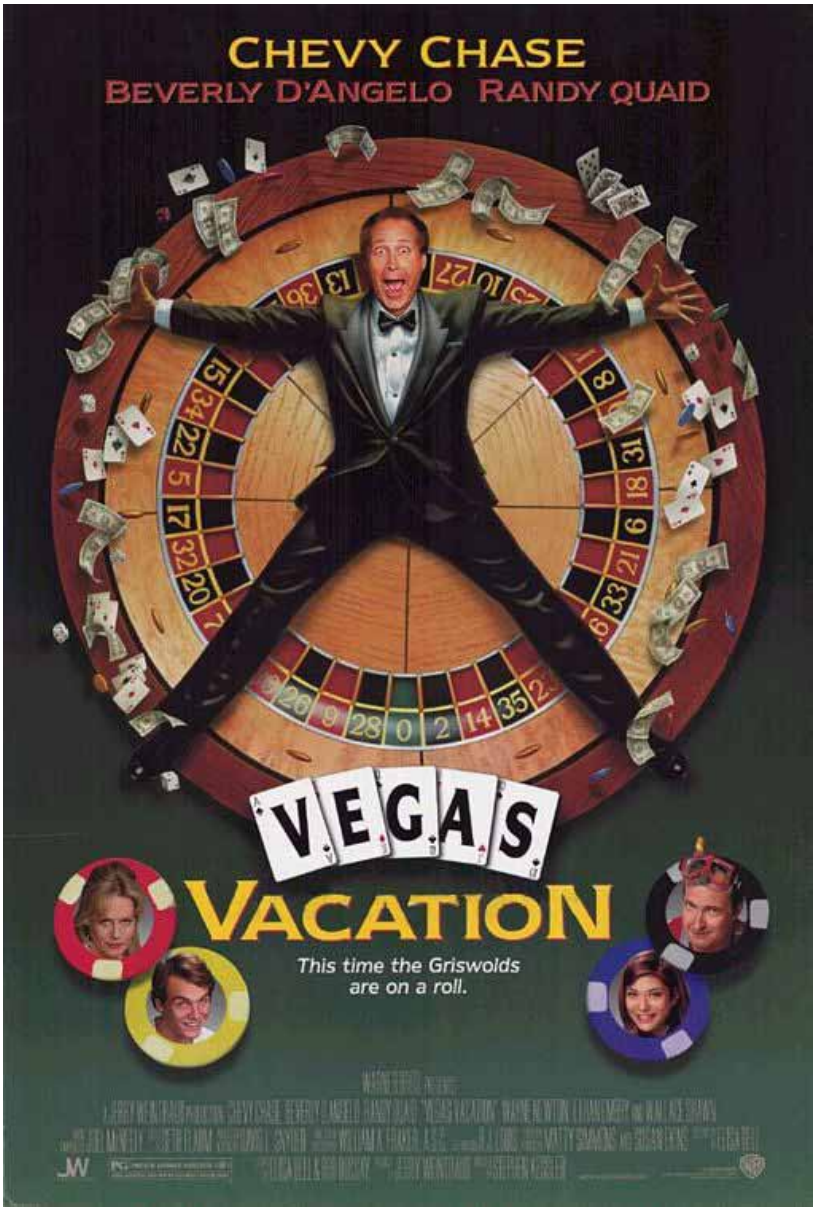


Image 26) The comedy *Vegas Vacation* (1997) played out the symbolic incongruities between families and gambling in Las Vegas, with mom and dad gambling away the family savings.

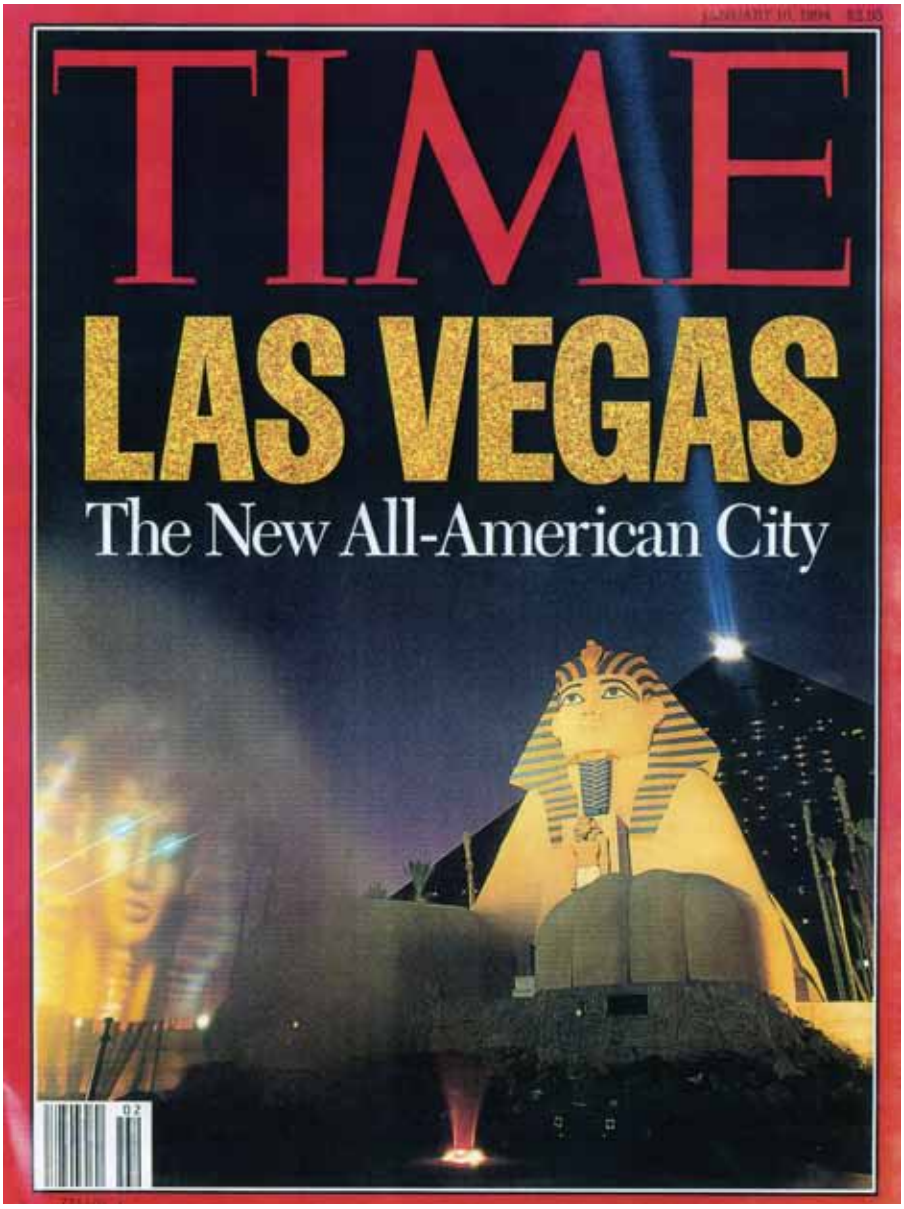


Image 27) Las Vegas was heralded as “the New All-American City” on the cover of *Time* magazine, January 10, 1994. By turning into a family destination on par with Disney, the Strip managed to suppress its Sin City image.

Image 28) “Site specific: LAS VEGAS 05, The Paris”, by Olivo Barbieri. Barbieri revealed the new “hyperreal” nature of Las Vegas, the “city as an avatar of itself”, through the blurring effect of a tilt-shift lens.

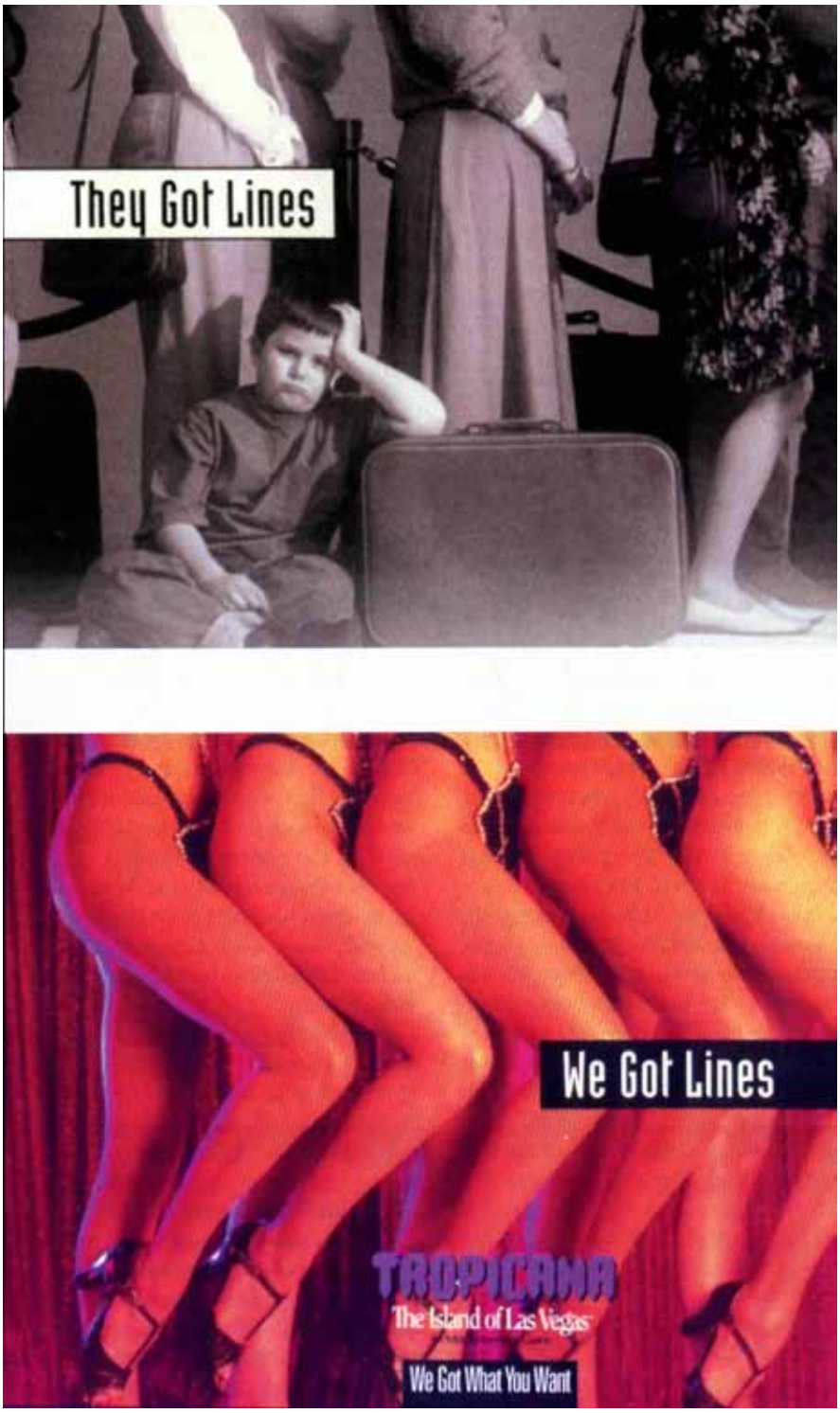


Image 29) When it became apparent that families were not the most profitable demographic, the Tropicana deliberately cast out the family image it had summoned only a decade ago.

Image 30) In the conversion of the “Emerald City” into the “City of Entertain¬ment”, the lion’s head entrance of the MGM Grand was removed, as well as Dorothy, the Tin Man and the Scare Crow. The only trace left of the Wizard of Oz theme was the emerald color of the façade. [23]

Image 31) Circus Circus used urban planning to get a competitive edge. It literally used a drawbridge to connect to the pedestrian bridges across the Strip, trying to reel people into the casino and the other resorts the company owned on its “Masterplan” mile. [24]

Image 32) The Strip still believed in the theming paradigm, yet sought to apply it to adult instead of family audiences. In Magical Empire in Caesars Palace, an “Adult Disneyland,” a cast of magicians and illusion¬ists entertained guests in private dining chambers. Theatrically lit faux stone walls were decorated with a mix of mythical bass reliefs and classical Corinthian columns. [25]

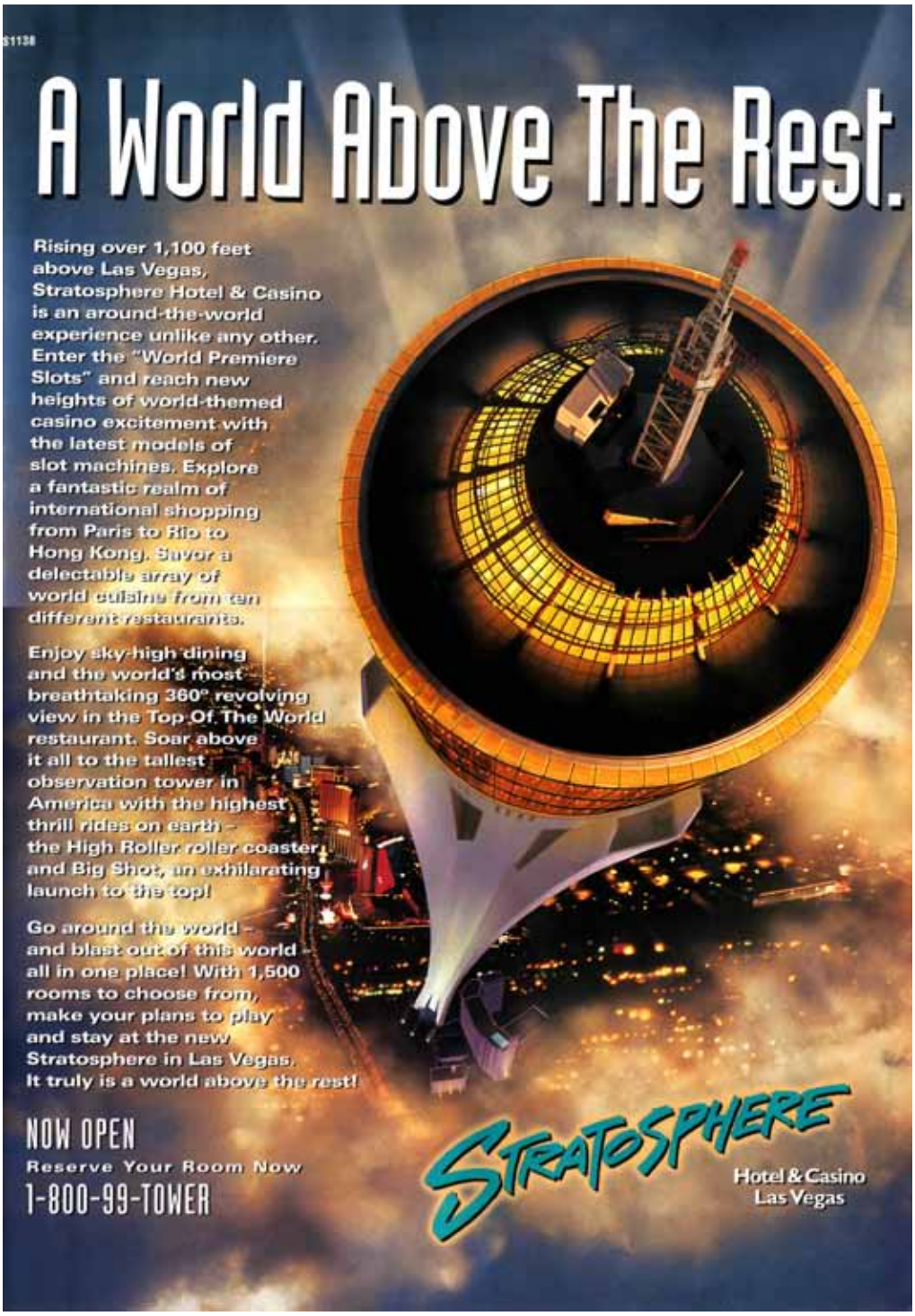


Image 33) The 1,149-foot Stratosphere, conceived by the maverick Bob Stupak, not a corporation, was the only new resort that did not conform to the Disney paradigm. Peaked by a thrill ride that launches people along a 160-foott steel shaft, it forced McCarran International Airport to modify the takeoffs from its north runway.

Image 34) The Monte Carlo attempted to attract a more adult demographic through its French *Belle Epoch* architectural style, which incorporated several elements of the Monaco Place du Casino, Paris Opera House and the Palace of Fine Arts building in San Francisco. [26]

Image 35) New York's most iconic monuments had been pasted in a more dramatic composition of a skyline at New York New York. What appears as a skyline of 10 different towers is in fact one single hotel tower. [27]

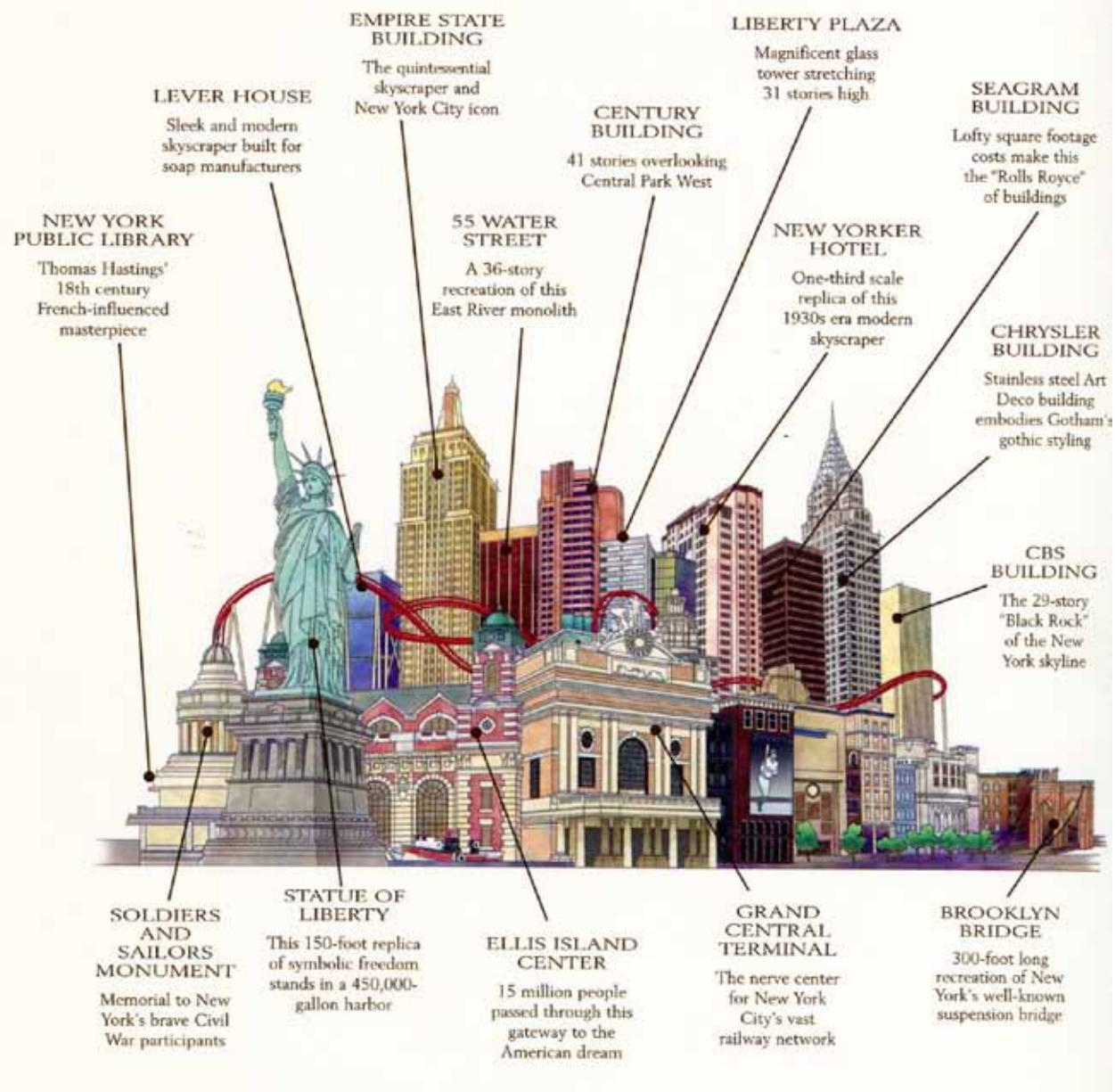


Image 36) The New York New York brochure highlighted the different architectural references, as a visual guide to New York. Through architectural quotation, the resort attempted to borrow from the symbolism of New York's icons of popular, political and corporate culture. [28]

Image 37) New York's once-bohemian Greenwich Village was reproduced inside the resort; it accommodated the food court. [29]

Image 38) "The Greatest City in Las Vegas" represented the greatest of New York in Las Vegas; it was not a photocopy but its epitome, a perfect example of the hyperreal.

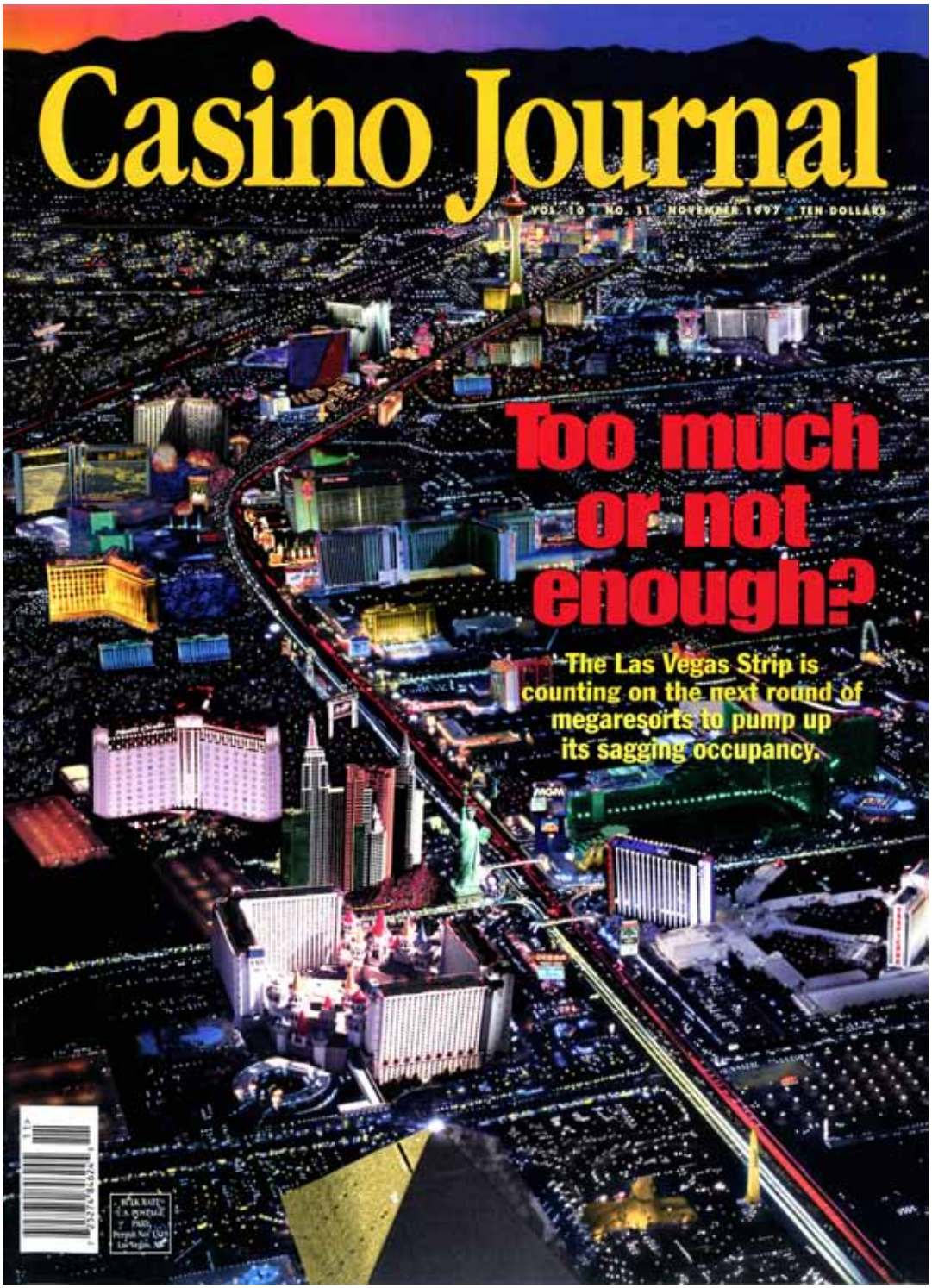


Image 39) Cover of *Casino Journal*, November 1997. Although investors on Wall Street thought the market was saturated, developers assumed that new themed resorts would "pump up its [the Strip's] sagging occupancy".

Image 40) Cirque du Soleil helped Las Vegas diversify into an entertainment, rather than a gaming only, destination. “O”, the Cirque du Soleil show at the Bellagio, was entirely performed in, on, and above a 1.5 million gallon pool. [30]

Image 41) The Bellagio used art as a way to attract wealthier tourist. The resort even had a $300 million art gallery, while the lobby featured Dale Chihuly's "Flowers of Como". [31]

Image 42) Although they were presented as radically new, the Bellagio's fountains built on the tradition of musical fountains on the Strip. [32]

Image 43) Wynn was not happy that Paris Las Vegas had the best views on the Bel¬lagio fountains, yet from the Bellagio Paris' Eiffel Tower replica was nicely visible as well. The competing resorts had turned the Strip into a tourist attraction in its own right. [33]

Image 44) Mandalay Bay continued the Strip practice of a tropical environment theme; it took its name from the largest city in Burma. The high-rise hotel tower, however, was not themed. [34]

Image 45) Mandalay Bay featured an 11-acre water park with a fake beach and wave pool to attract Southern Californian beach revelers that might have gone to real beaches otherwise. [35]

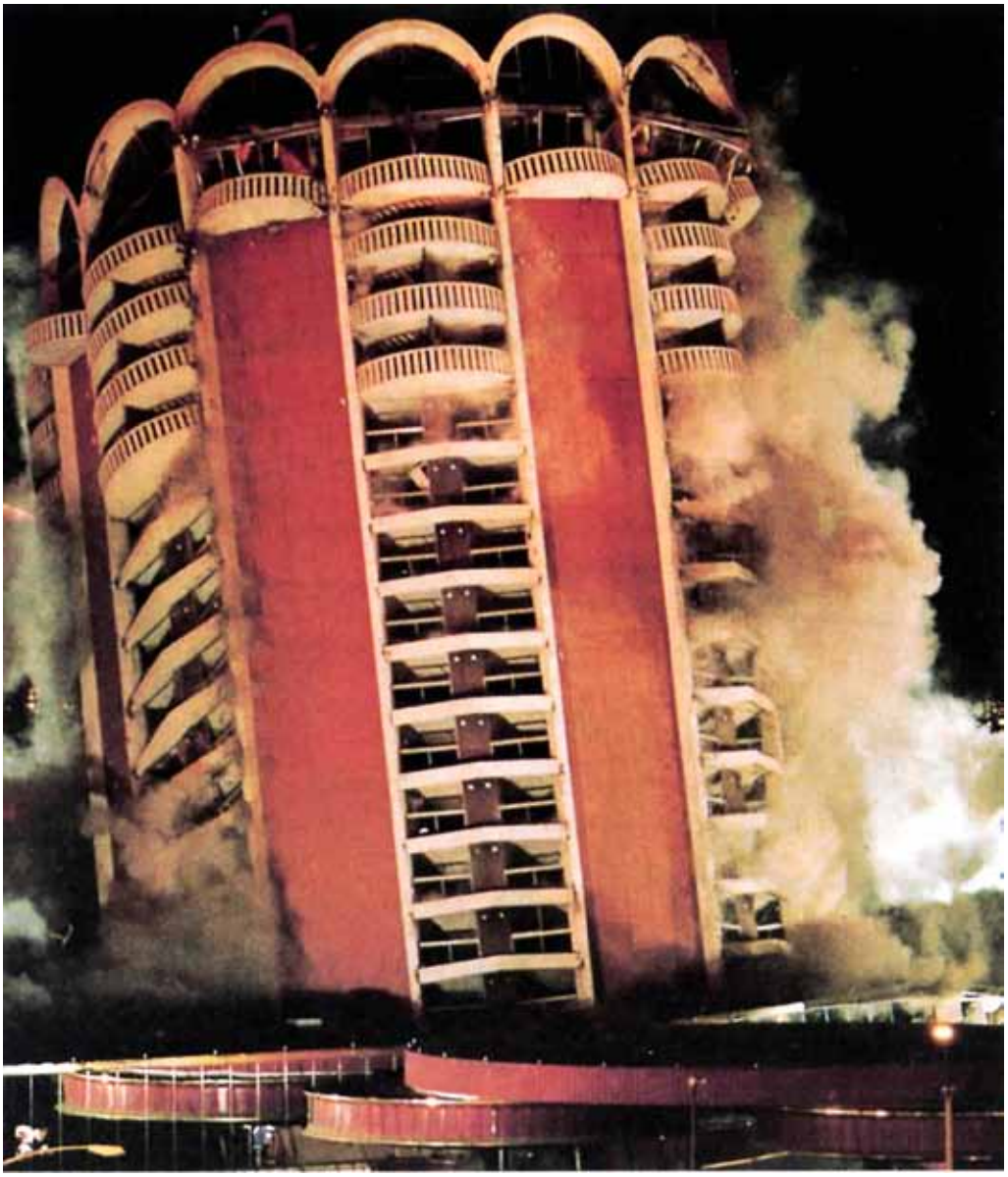


Image 46) “Oh. . . . well, it wasn’t much of a tower . . .” said architect Martin Stern when he heard about the implosion of his Sands tower. The new generation of resorts on the Strip was much taller; the 14 stories of the Sands disappeared in front of the 34-story Venetian. [36]

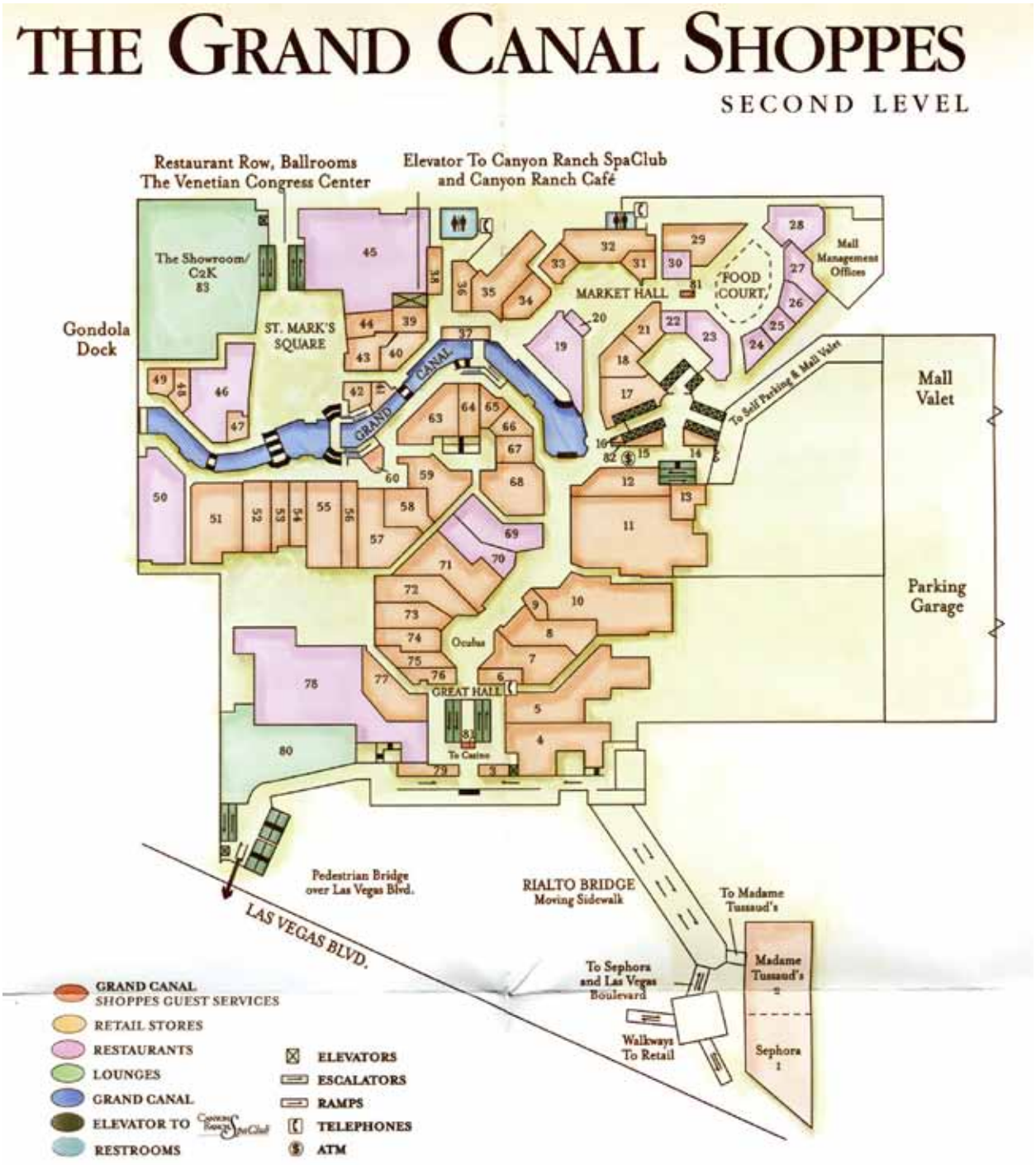


Image 47) The Grand Canal Shoppes in the Venetian ingeniously increased its commercial real estate value when it fronted shops with a 630-foot Grand Canal and a St. Mark's Square. [37]

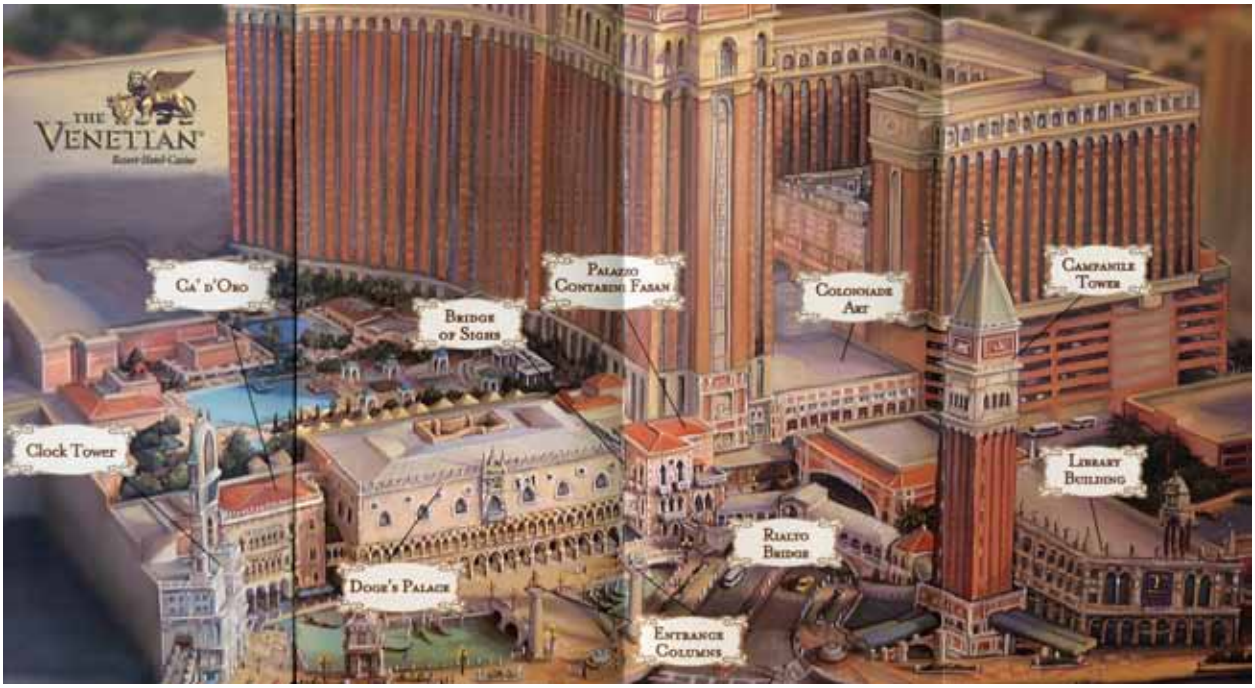


Image 48) Although individual buildings were reproduced with great accuracy in the Venetian, their joint composition was unlike the real Venice, to create a more dramatic entrance. [38]

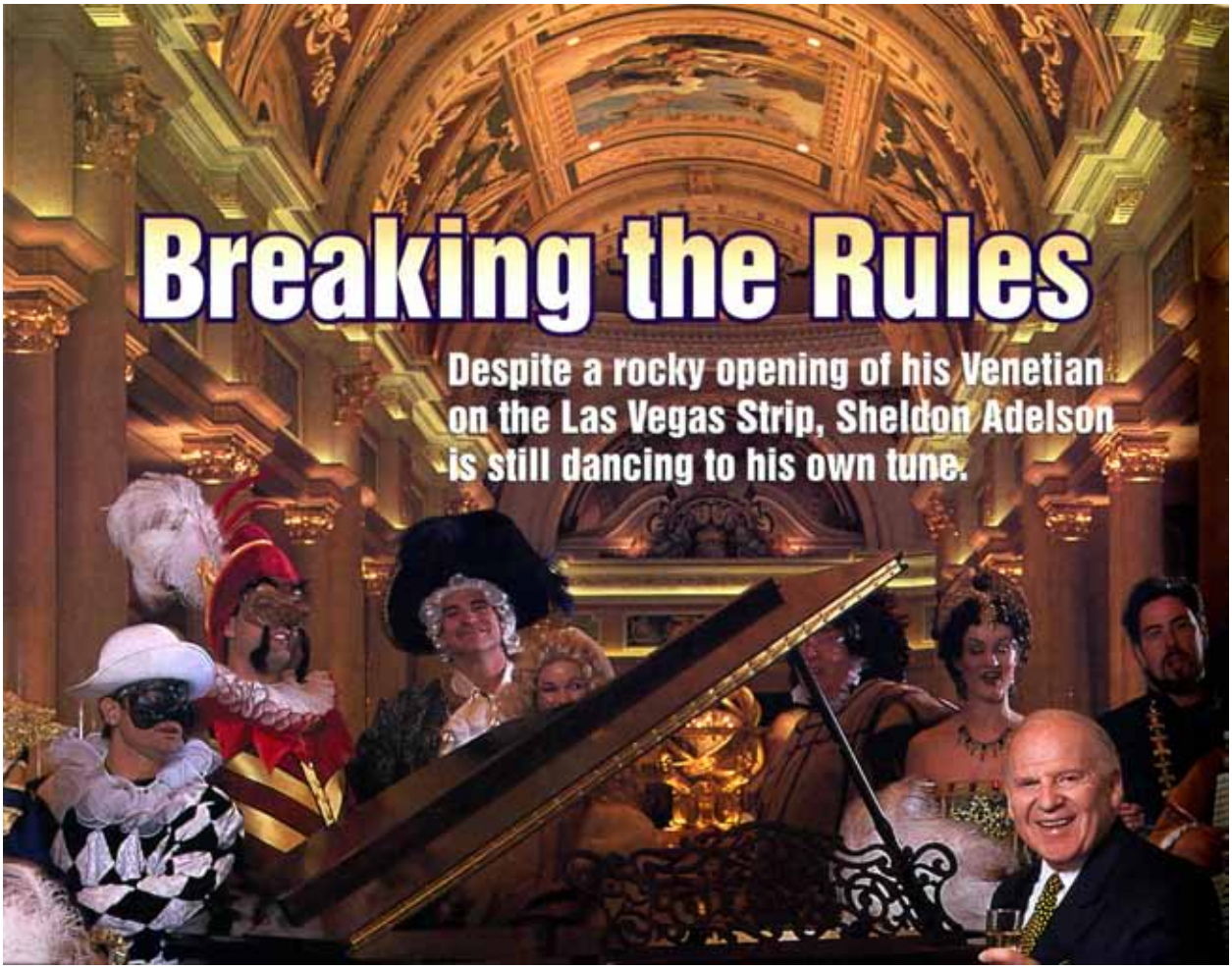


Image 49) Sheldon Adelson (right) with his staff at the Venetian. Singers and dancers wearing traditional masks and costumes roamed the property to evoke the spirit of the yearly *Carnevale di Venezia.* [39]

Image 50) The Venetian's Grand Canal flowed inside the building as well, where it was located one floor above the casino. Only few architects appreciated the ingenious hybrid of a casino complex and Venice; most of them rejected the new Strip resorts as "fakes". [40]

Image 51) In a departure from the original, the half-size replica of the Eiffel Tower stood partly outside on the Strip, partly inside the casino, at Paris Las Vegas, to make it visible all the time. [41]

Image 52) On the south corner of Paris Las Vegas the Paris Opera House was reproduced. Designer Silverman said that it was a challenge to develop new concepts for resorts, since so many cities had already been replicated in Las Vegas. “We’re running out of cities,” he said. [42] [43]

Image 53) A scaled down copy of the Arc de Triomphe marked the access lane of Paris Las Vegas, whereas the hotel tower was modeled after Hotel de Ville. [44]

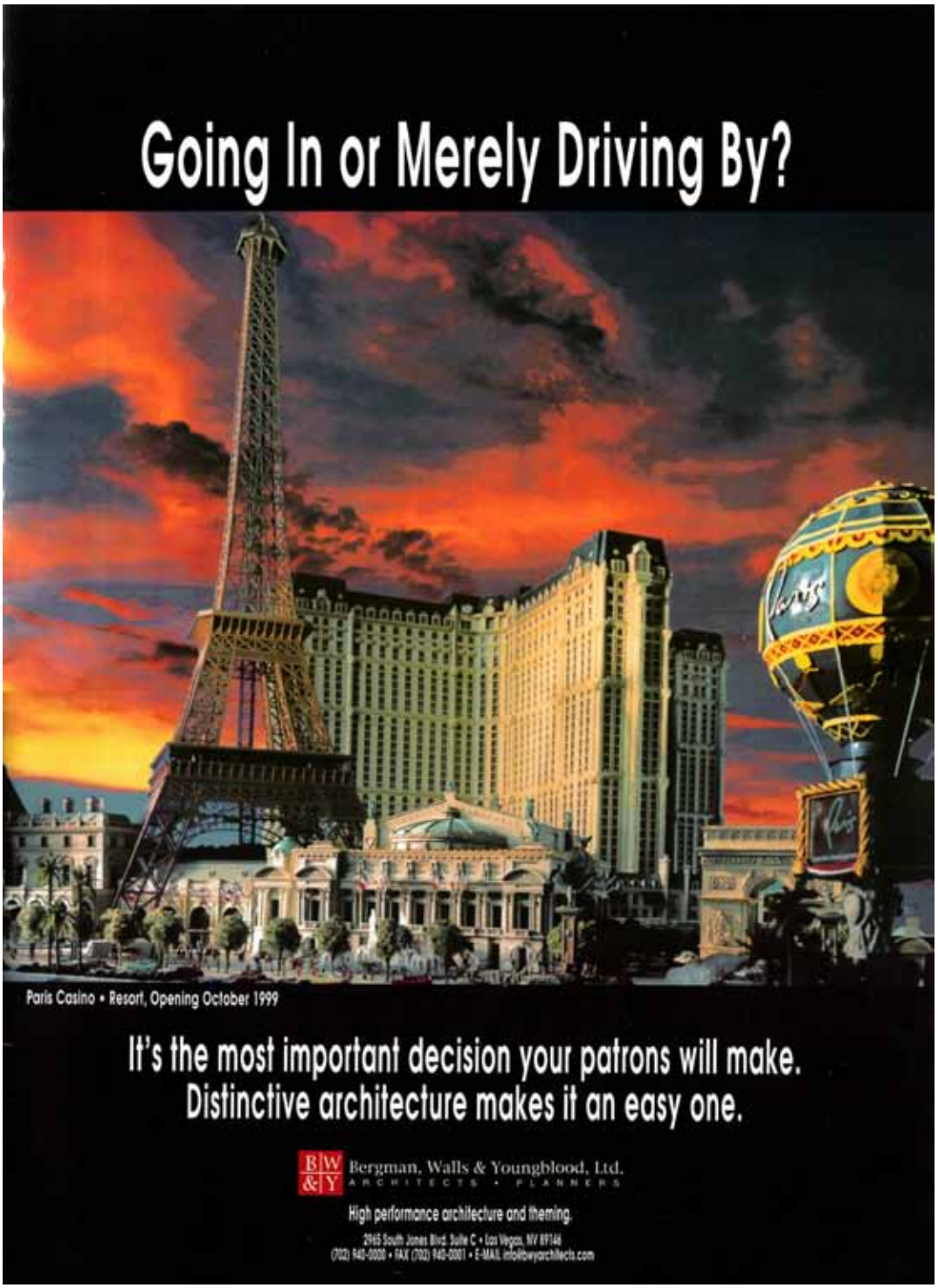


Image 54) While the advertisement of architects Bergman, Walls, and Youngblood, Ltd. still expressed their belief in theming, with the completion of two of the most themed resorts on the Strip, Paris, Las Vegas and the Venetian, expert imaginations would gradually shift away from the paradigm. [45]

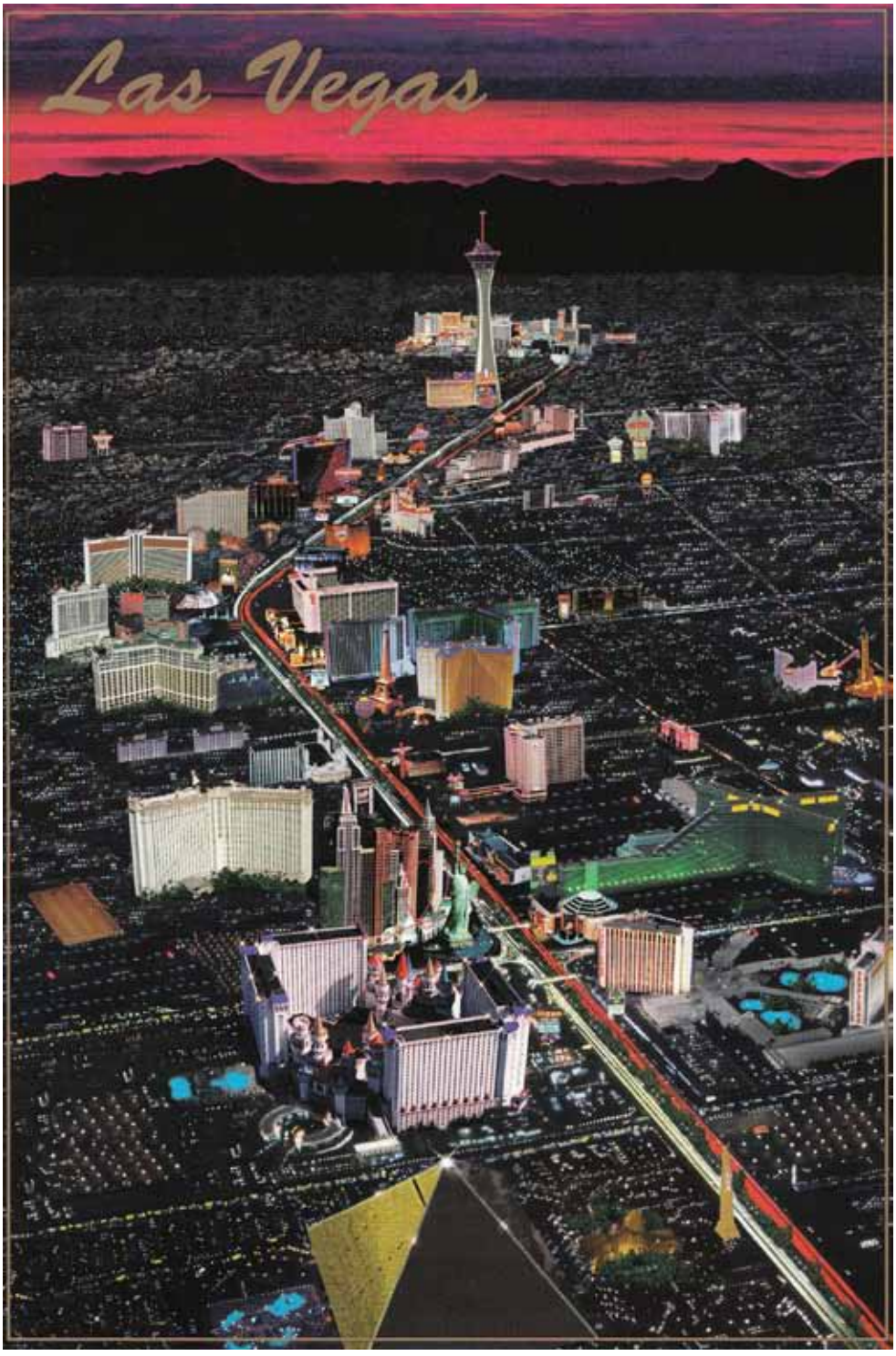


Image 55) After the third building boom, the Strip was lined up with multiple competing Disney-like resorts, and had turned into an attraction in its own right. [46]

Endnotes

[1] Mirage publicity photograph. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[2] Mirage publicity photograph. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[3] Mirage publicity photograph. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[4] Courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

[5] Artist rendering. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[6] Excalibur publicity photograph. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[7] Artist rendering by Yates Silverman. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[8] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[9] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[10] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[11] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[12] Elevation by Yates Silverman. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[13] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[14] Treasure Island publicity image. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[15] Courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

[16] Photograph by William Mercer McLeod. Published in *Time* magazine.

[17] Photograph published in the *Las Vegas Sun*.

[18] Courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

[19] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[20] MGM Grand Publicity photograph. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[21] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[22] Floor plan of the MGM Grand Hotel and Theme Park. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[23] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[24] Courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

[25] Caesars Palace publicity image. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[26] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[27] Artist rendering of New York New York. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[28] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[29] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[30] Publicity photograph by Veronique Vial.

[31] Photograph by Stefan Al.

[32] Courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

[33] Courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

[34] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[35] Publicity photograph of Mandalay Bay. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[36] Photograph from *Casino Journal*.

[37] Floor plan of the Grand Canal Shoppes. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[38] The Venetian brochure. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[39] Photograph from *Casino Journal*, June 1999.

[40] Courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

[41] Courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

[42] Courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

[43] Caruso, Monica. 1999. Designers Want to Offer a Stylized French Feel. *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, August 30.

[44] Courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

[45] Advertising published in *Casino Journal*.

[46] Postcard of the Las Vegas Strip, circa 1999. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

Images Chapter Five
Starchitecture: The Global Branding of the Strip (2001–Present)

Image 1) At the turn of the millennium, experts imagined “branding” as the new paradigm for the gaming industry. “Whether by airing targeted TV commercials or erecting new casinos, brands are bringing gaming companies customers and their money.” [1]

Image 2) In response to 9/11, tourists and locals left “real” personal items such as T-shirts in front of the “fake” Statue of Liberty of the New York New York. The resort ended up building a permanent shrine for the victims, and the artifacts were permanently stored in the Special Collections of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. [2]

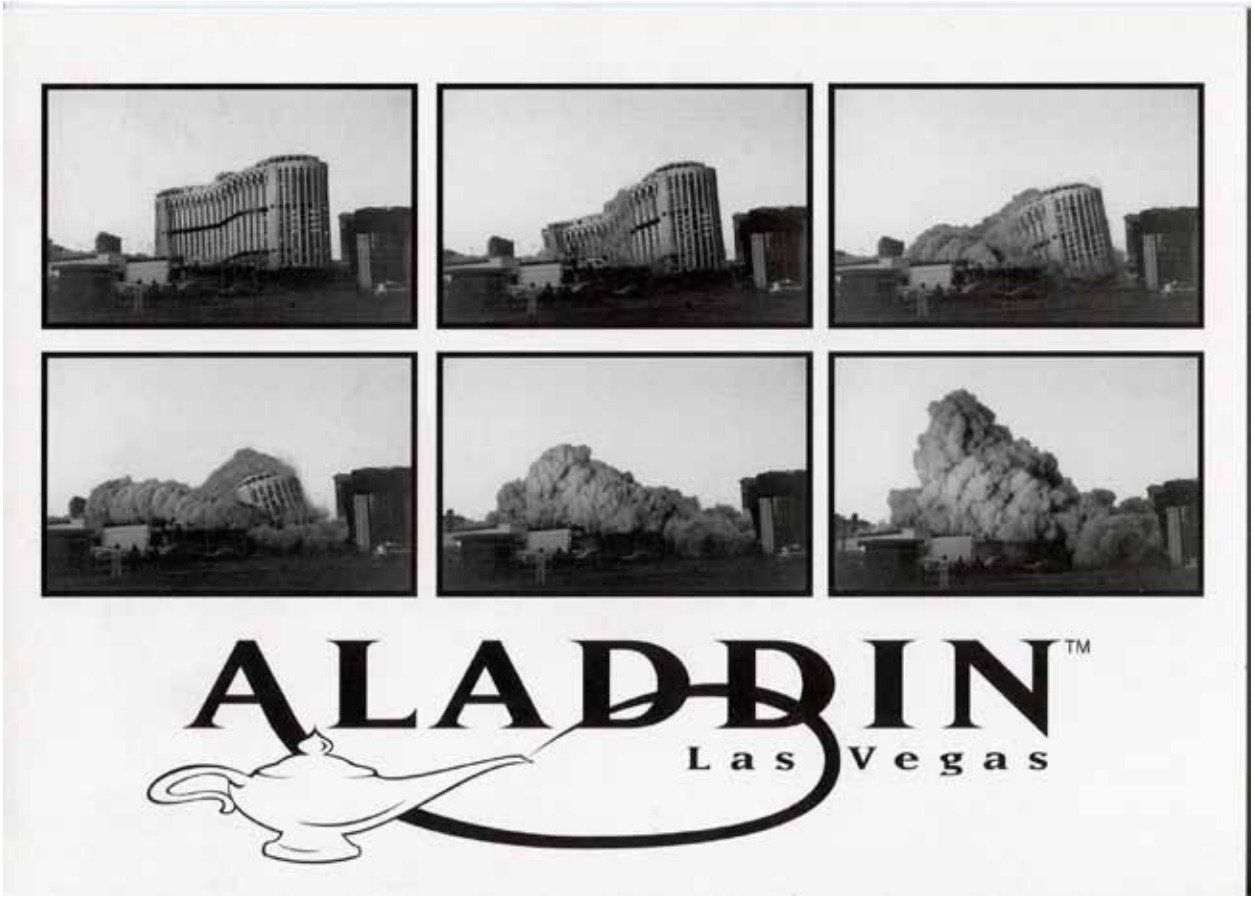


Image 3) In 1998, the Aladdin was imploded to make way for a new resort with the same name and theme. The Aladdin was the only resort to survive an implosion, temporarily. [3]

Image 4) Domes, minarets, arches, and a faux-sandstone cliff decorated the front façade of the new Aladdin. After 9/11, five decades of Arabian themes on the Strip would come to an end. [4]

Image 5) The Desert Passage shopping mall remained as one of the few traces of Aladdin within the Planet Hollywood. [5]

Image 6) In lieu of the faux vernacular nomadic architecture of the Aladdin, Planet Hollywood had a swirling façade with neon-lit circular patterns. Besides the architecture, the new owner of the resort, the global brand Planet Hollywood, also reflected the new phase on the Strip. [6]

Image 7) The “Big Box” first and final exhibition in the Venetian was an unusual Pritzker Prize laureate teaming between the architect of the gallery, Rem Koolhaas, and the designer of the exhibition, Frank Gehry. Their involvement in the design of the Strip prefigured the new “starchitecture” phase. [7]

Image 8) The smooth façade of the Palms Fantasy Tower was only pierced by the swimming pools in suites, and the Playboy Club on top. ”It is the return of the bunnies,” said Playboy founder Hugh Hefner of his only Playboy Club to the Times. He noticed his brand was “very hot again,” like in the freewheeling 1960s when his magazine and clubs flourished, until “the 1980s turned conservative politically and sexually with Reagan in the White House and the arrival of AIDS.” [8] [9]

Image 9) After a decade-long reign, the skull-and-crossbones sign of the Treasure Island retired to the Boneyard, the Las Vegas neon museum; it was one in a host of theme park casualties in the branding of Las Vegas as a hip nightlife destination for young adults. [10]

Image 10) The new Treasure Island sign shed the Pirate theme, and spelled the acronym in a modern font that doubled as LCD screens, “T.I.” [11]

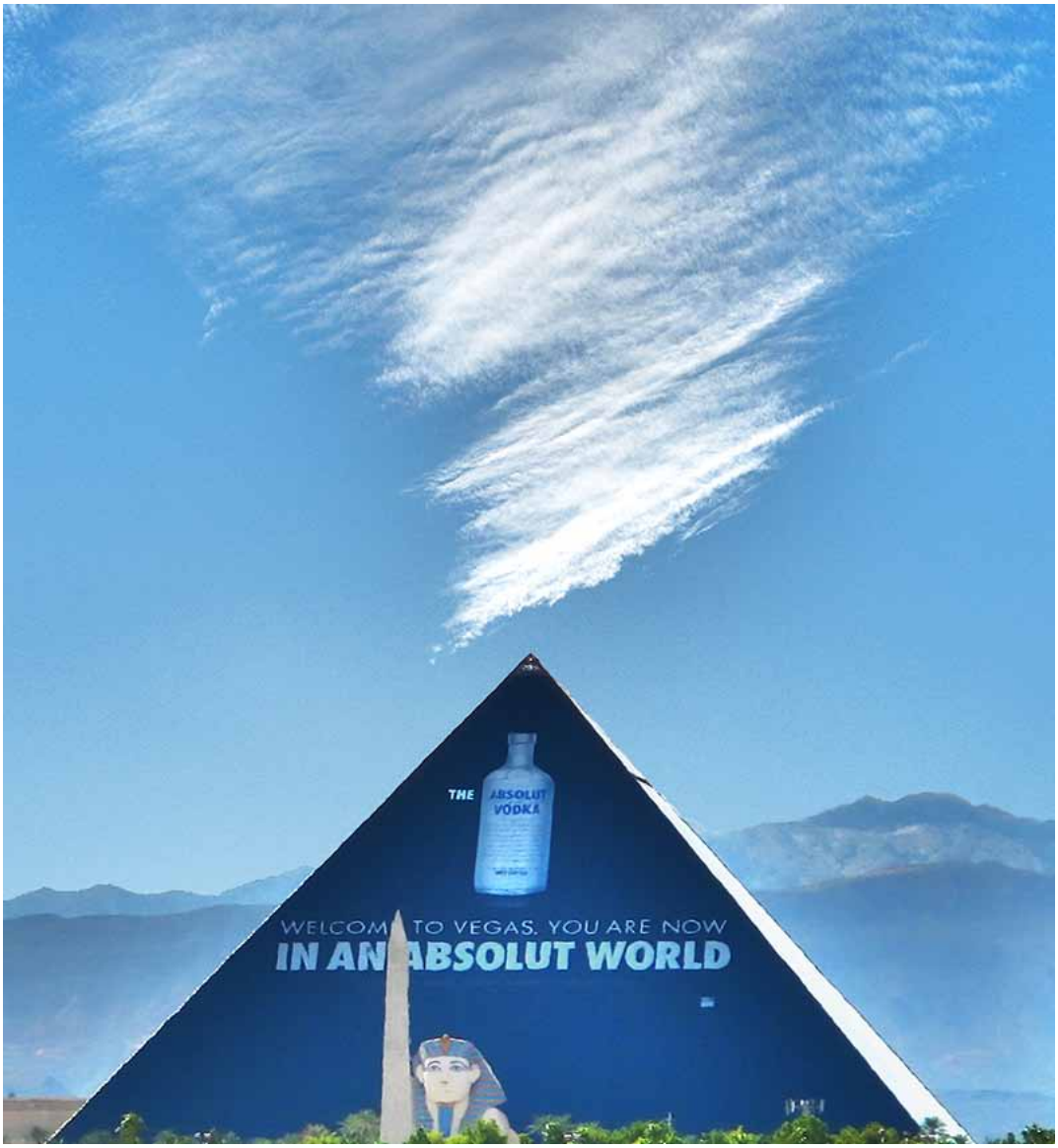


Image 11) By 2007 most of the theming inside the resort was gone at the Luxor Las Vegas, partly because some Asian visitors considered it a tomb. Moreover, the once family-friendly Luxor overtly exploited the synergy between their resort and a vodka brand; it was a sharp departure from not even a decade ago, when Coca Cola had built their glass Coke bottle in front of MGM Grand.

Image 12) French designer Patrick Jouin designed a two-story coral-colored bar top out of perforated and backlit fiberglass at Mix Lounge, and a chandelier with 15,000 hand-blown glass spheres at Mix Restaurant in The Hotel, an addition to Mandalay Bay that was not themed. [12]

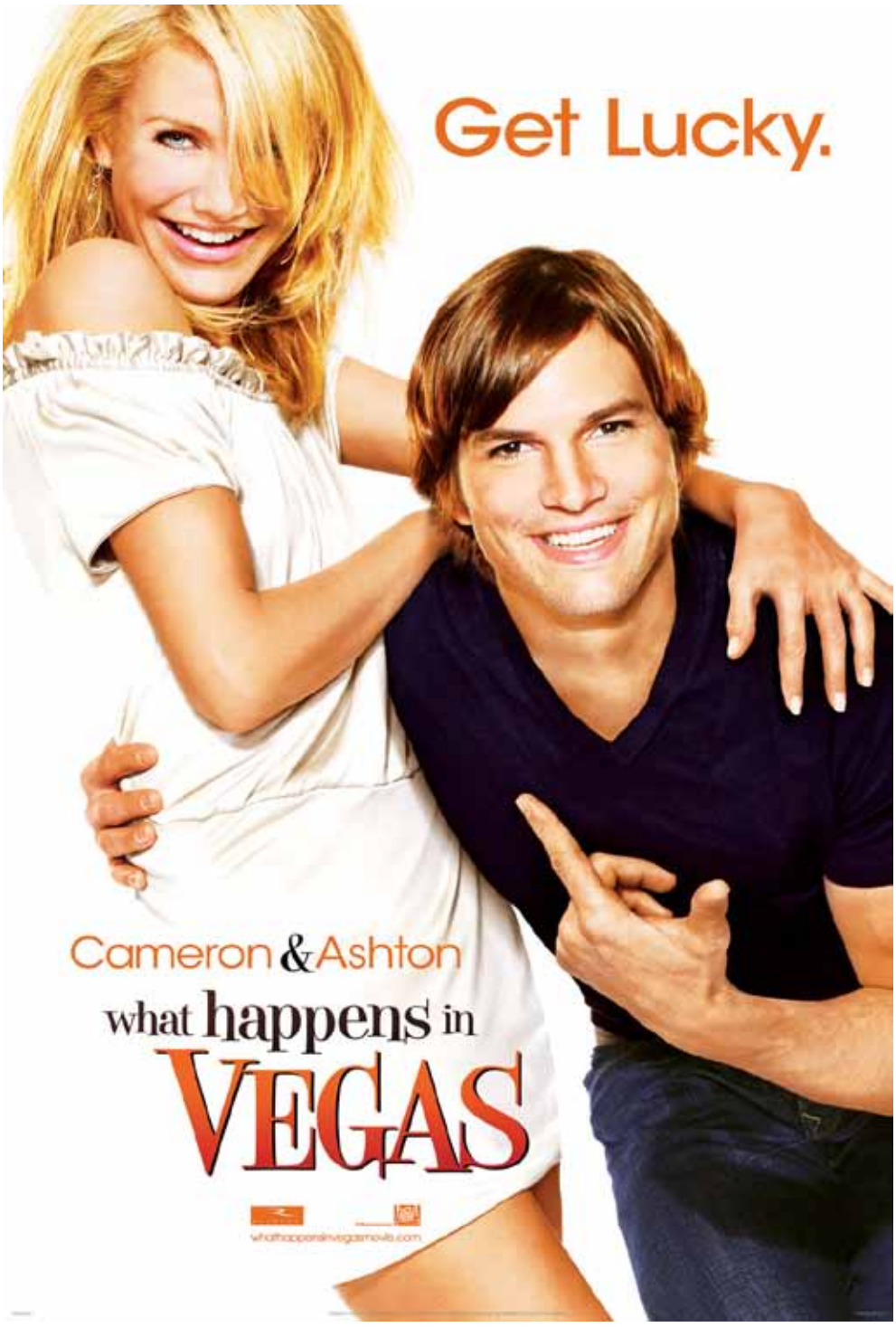
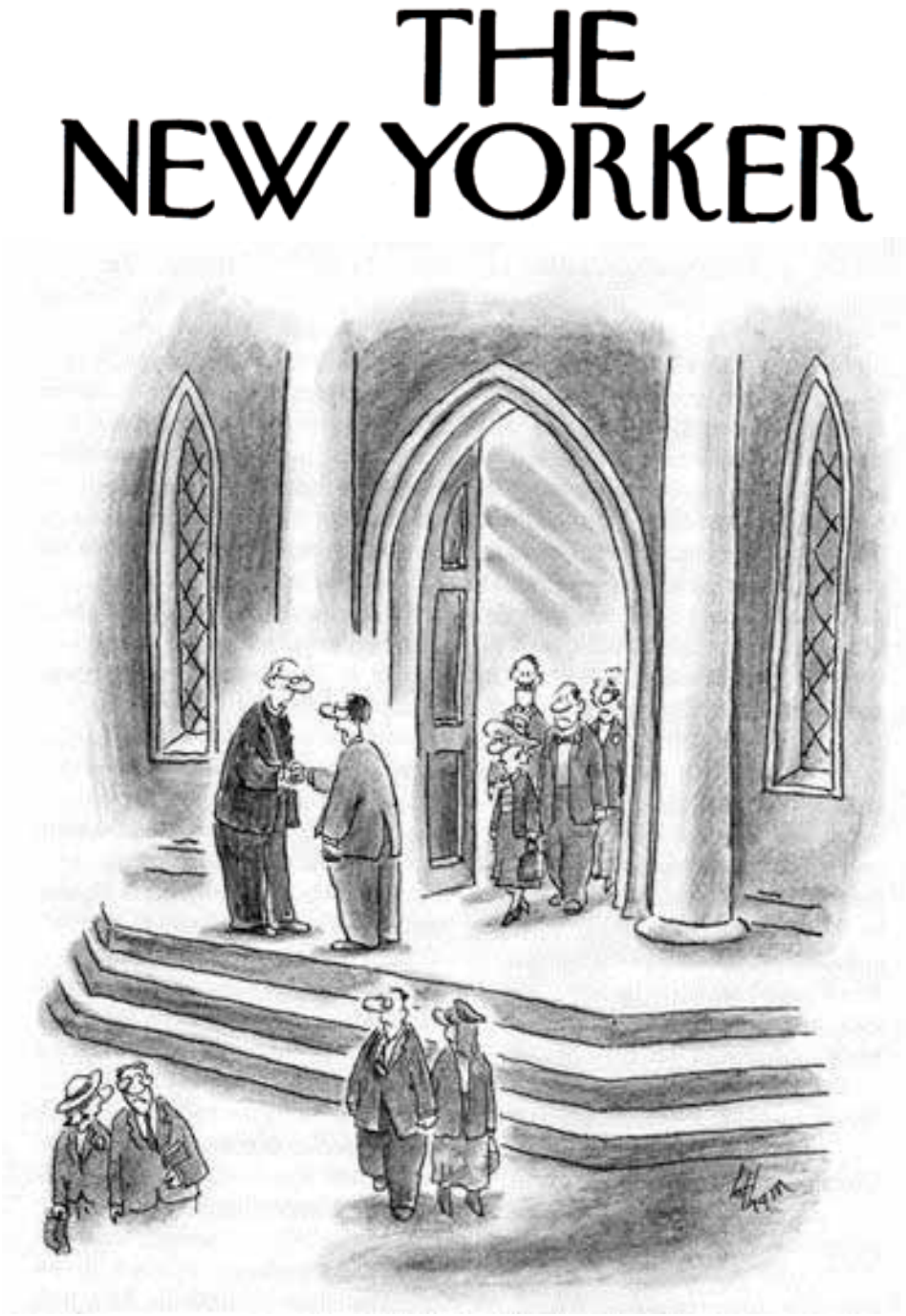


Image 13) No longer portrayed Hollywood Las Vegas as a family destination, nor did "Get Lucky" refer to gambling. Instead, the city had become the stereotypical site of the bachelor and debauchery trip, for instance in *What Happens in Vegas* (2008), and *The Hangover* (2009).



"He knows what you did in Las Vegas."

Image 14) The new city slogan, "What happens here, stays here," brought in the world by the Las Vegas Visitors and Convention Authority, had become a cultural phenomenon. "He knows what you did in Las Vegas," says a preacher to an uneasy man as he leaves church, in a cartoon by Frank Cotham in the July 4 2005 *New Yorker*.

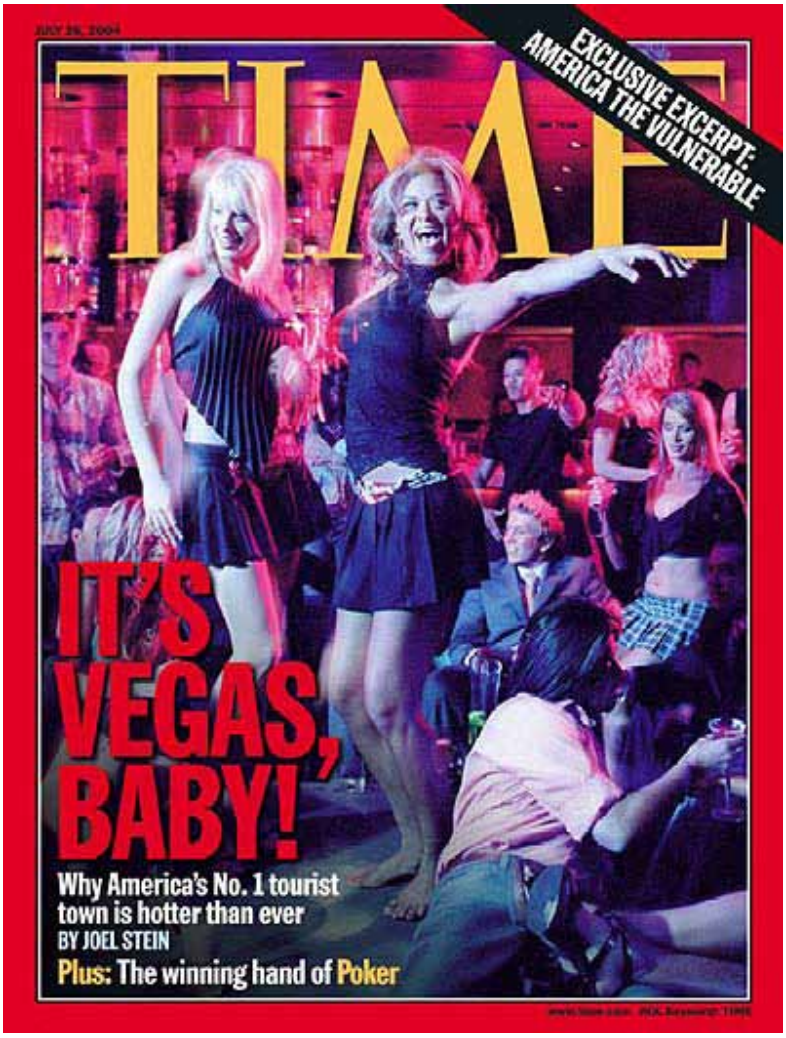


Image 15) The cover of the 26 July 2004 *Time* depicted the new demographic that was transforming Las Vegas into a destination that was "hotter than ever": young affluent singles.

Image 16) Steve Wynn now had become a personal brand, “the Wynn”, which strategically associated itself with a Ferrari and Maserati dealership. The design of the resort was to be replicated globally. [13]

Image 17) Every 15 minutes, human figures and an over-scaled head that functioned as a projection screen rose out of the water in the Lake of Dreams. The spectacle was only visible from inside the resort, and co-opted somewhat of the surrealism of Cirque de Soleil. [14]

Image 18) Wynn built a $200 million artificial mountain to shield his resort, and the Lake of Dreams, off from the public realm of the Las Vegas Strip. It was a sharp departure from only a decade ago, when theme park like attractions fronted resorts. [15]

Image 19) The Encore high-rise was almost an exact duplicate of the Wynn. Besides their difference in architectural style, the new generation of resorts was bigger than that of the 1990s: where Encore and Wynn both had 50 stories, Treasure Island had only 36. [16]

Image 20) Encore had stepped up the pool race by adding a full-fledged nightclub. VIP tables and cabanas surrounded the prime real estate of the pool in XS, the 40,000-foot nightclub at Encore. Inspired by “the sexy curves of the human body,” the club was decorated with mirrored mosaics, gold crocodile embossed leather, and brushed brass and gold resin bar tops. [17]

Image 21) High-rise condominium complexes sprawled on, as well as off, the Las Vegas Strip. Harmon Avenue, along which the gated residential complex of the Panorama towers stood, became a major corridor perpendicular to the Strip. [18]

Image 22) The Trump Tower, with its windows gilded in 24-carat gold, was one of the new high-rises that speculated on the condo craze on the Strip. [19]

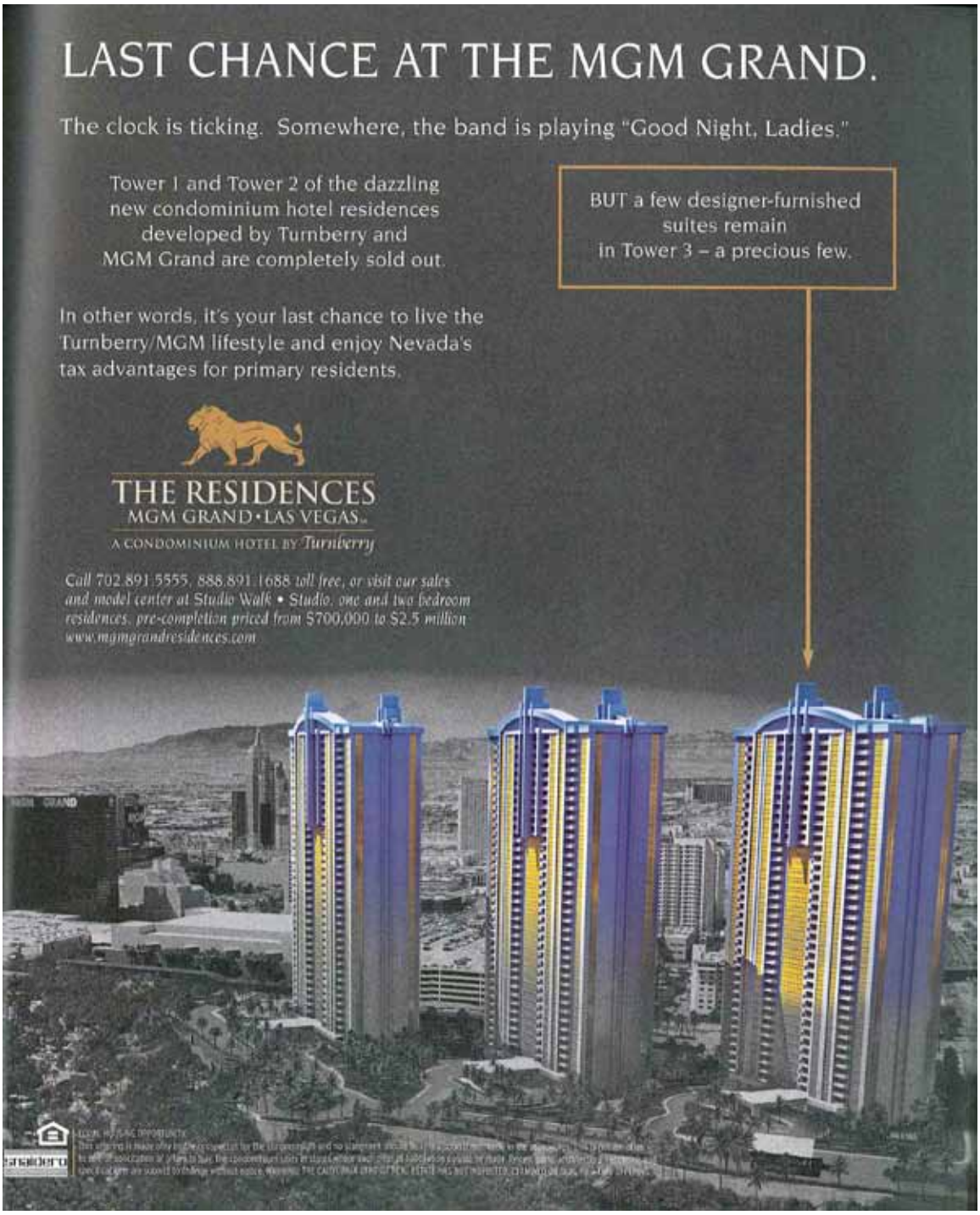


Image 23) The three luxury Signature towers at the MGM Grand stood where once was the theme park, so that people could buy into the "Turnberry/MGM lifestyle."

Image 24) Jon Jerde, previously responsible for the theming of Treasure Island and the Bellagio, now designed the sleek and modern 47-story Palms Place condominium tower. [20]

Image 25) Contemporary urban architecture was considered the new theme of the Cosmopolitan. “Our theme is cosmopolitan,” said CEO Bruce Eichner of his new resort. “Cosmopolitan is urban and urban is architectural and experiential.” [21]

Image 26) As a result of the condominium boom, the number of high-rises on the Las Vegas Strip had increased. In the center, the 63-story Fontainebleau is under construction. Sky Las Vegas, a 45-floor condominium tower, can be seen on the left. [22]

Image 27) Symptomatic of the new Strip, on the site of the imploded Stardust and Budget Suites, the luxury Echelon Palace was being planned; the different hotel brands within the complex were expressed in individual contemporary architectural styles. [23]

Image 28) CityCenter used contemporary art to lure people into the resort. Nancy Rubins' canoe sculpture, standing in front of Aria within the complex, was one of the pieces in CityCenter's $40 million "public" art collection. [24]

Image 29) CityCenter provided for urban “public” spaces within the private realms of its casino complex, such as a “pocket park” with a sculpture from Henry Moore. [25]

Image 30) Different “starchitects” were commissioned to design the various buildings of Project City Center, as to simulate a real city center. In addition, they differentiated the various hotel brands from another within the complex. [26]

Image 31) "When was the last time you said 'amazing' and meant it," states the advertisement for Aria, depicting an exterior render of the resort designed by Rafael Vinoly, fronted by Nancy Rubins' canoe sculpture. Contemporary art and architecture had become the new fetish on the Strip. [27]

Image 32) Daniel Libeskind, known for his museums, designed the shopping mall of the largest commercial development in the United States with museum-like elements. “I don’t believe in this old-fashioned distinction between cultural and commercial projects, as if we live in split worlds,” said Libeskind. “I want to blur and erase the lines between culture and commerce. And it’s a fact that museums want to be successful economically, too.”[28] [29]

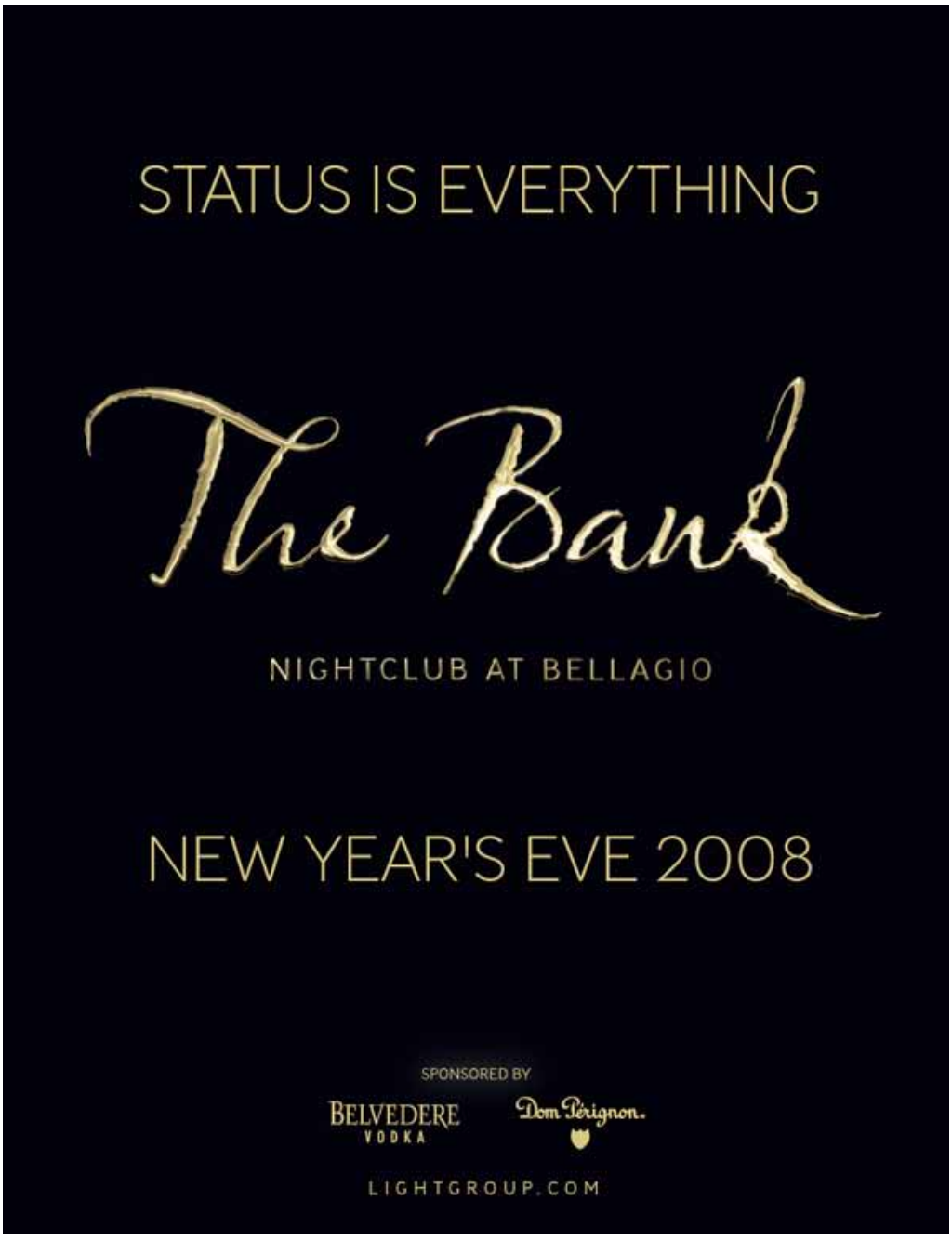


Image 33) “Status is Everything” states a poster of the Bank, the new nightclub of the Bellagio. An army of bouncers, a maze of velvet ropes, and a crowd of cocktail waitresses produced a commensurate reverence to excessive spending.

Image 34) Behind padlocked fences, among dismantled cranes, stood the carcass of Echelon Palace as a monument to global financial crisis. The only bright side was that the desert's dry climate would not decay the skeleton for at least five years. [30]

Image 35) Las Vegas featured as "Less Vegas" on the cover of *Time*, August 14 2009. The city had become the poster child of the global financial crisis of 2008.

Endnotes

[1] Image from *Casino Journal*, August 2000, of the article "Casino Branding."

[2] Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[3] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[4] Postcard. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

[5] Copyright Stan Shebs from the Wikipedia Commons.

[6] Photograph from *Desert Companion*, 2008.

[7] Online image. Copyright Kimberly from the Wikipedia Commons.

[8] 2006. Q & A: Hugh Hefner. *Time*, October 4.

[9] Waynecs. Online image. Flickr.

[10] Vintage Vegas. Online image. Flickr.

[11] Tiger Jack. Online image. Flickr.

[12] Photograph by Stefan Al.

[13] Photograph from Wynn Las Vegas.

[14] Photograph from Wynn Las Vegas.

[15] Photograph by Stefan Al.

[16] Travel Nevada. Online image. Flickr.

[17] Photograph by Barbara Kraft.

[18] Vintage Vegas. Online image. Flickr.

[19] Photograph by Stefan Al.

[20] Online image. Copyright Marc Berry from the Wikipedia Commons.

[21] Smith, Hubble. 2005. Hot! Hip! Harmon! *Las Vegas Review-Journal,* March 20.

[22] Jbspec7. Online image. Flickr.

[23] Copyright Echelon Palace.

[24] Photograph by Stefan Al.

[25] Copyright Project CityCenter.

[26] Copyright Project CityCenter.

[27] Photograph by Orange Buensuceso.

[28] Photograph by Stefan Al.

[29] Jana, Reena. 2009. 'Starchitect' Libeskind Reinvents the Mall. *BusinessWeek: Innovation*, April 20.

[30] Photograph by Stefan Al.

Images Chapter Six
Conclusion

Image 1) Among other signs, the “Landmark” sign lies discarded on “The Boneyard,” Las Vegas’ neon museum. Landmarks don’t last long on the Strip. [1]

Endnotes

[1] S Balcomb. Online image. Flickr.