Welcome to Theoretical Las Vegas

By Stefan Al

Abstract

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

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

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

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

1 All quotes in this section are taken from: Schoemann, Joe. 2008. Planning official up in arms over putdowns of Las Vegas. Las Vegas Sun, May 3.
Vegas does not do well in thinking of itself in historical terms … Anything that promotes looking back is, by definition, unwelcome in this city,” he said. “Las Vegas wished the downtown would simply evaporate.”

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

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

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

Theory as Spectacle

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

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

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

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

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

**Spectacular Theories of Las Vegas**

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


When we put the event into context, it becomes clear that Las Vegas, often theorized as the ultimate spectacular city, has a commensurate history of
spectacular theories. It is as if, like Debord realized, the only way with to
engage the visual spectacle of the Las Vegas Strip is through its method.

Tom Wolfe, spectacular writer par excellence, set the tradition. In 1965
he published the essay Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can’t hear you!
Too noisy) Las Vegas!!!! By comparing the city to Versailles he shook
up the cultural establishment, and brought the city to the attention of
architectural and urban theorists. Already one year after its publication,
Las Vegas became a mandatory destination for any architecture
student visiting North America.2 The essay would later re-appear
in Wolfe’s book There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored
(Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) Around the
Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm)…. It was as notorious as it was
well received. “Excellent book by a genius who will do anything to get
attention,” wrote Kurt Vonnegut. The quote would feature prominently
on the cover of the book – well, only the first five words, obviously.

In 1972 Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour published Learning from Las
Vegas. Unlike Wolfe, who in his essay also explored the victims of the
“toxic schizophrenia” of the Las Vegas Strip, Venturi and his colleagues
had no interest in the darker side of the city. “Las Vegas’s values are not
questioned here,”3 they wrote in the introduction. The Las Vegas Strip
was analyzed only as a “phenomenon of architectural communication;”
it was spectacle in its purest form that these Yale professors were after.
Their work 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. The first edition of the
book could not be more spectacular: it had a gold stamped title and a
glassine wrap printed in black and red, with more graphics between the
covers than text. It worked; the book got a lot of attention, and cemented
Las Vegas’ position as the cultural icon on the postmodern firmament.

Soon, flocks of semioticians and philosophers would fly into the city,
theorizing Las Vegas as a “hyperreality,” an absolutely fake city that no
longer refers to reality. Umberto Eco was doubtful to include Las Vegas
in his Travels in Hyperreality, realizing that Las Vegas is still a “real”
city, transformed into “a residential city, a place of business, industry,
conventions.”4 Eventually he skipped Las Vegas in his travels, being
only interested in the absolute fake. Bruce Bégout, however, a French

2 Banham, Reyner. 1975. Mediated environments or: you can’t build that here.
In C. W. E. Bigsby (ed.), Superculture: American popular culture in Europe. London:
Paul Elek.
3 Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour. 1986. Learning from
Las Vegas: The forgotten symbolism of architectural form. Cambridge, MA.: The MIT
philosopher, wrote an entire book on the city. He saw Las Vegas as a Zeropolis, a city of nothing, with an “urbanity of nothingness.” A University of Nevada, Las Vegas, professor contested the analysis: “If that’s the case, I’d like a full refund of my real estate taxes, and the cops and firefighters are probably wondering why they’ve been getting paid to watch over “nothingness” all these years.”

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

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

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