Nighttime and daytime blurred: hyperreality and kitsch in Las Vegas

Clara Irazábal
Architect
Assistant professor
School of Policy, Planning and Development
University of Southern California, USA
irazabal@usc.edu

Abstract

This study investigates the production of hyperreality and kitsch in the last generation of tourist/gambling developments in Las Vegas. In these environments, the distinctions between nighttime and daytime are purposely blurred or made insignificant through the manipulation for the creation of spectacle and the production of a sense of alienation from time and reality. This suspension of real time and space, is aimed at both facilitating the deceiving perception of false, constructed "natures," and producing ideal sites for pleasure and consumption.

I engage this exploration through two main analytical concepts: hyperreality and kitsch. Building upon this theoretical framework, I propose the term hyperkitsch to denote the phenomenon in Las Vegas, and I claim that people’s fascination with hyperkitsch iconography that relates to the urban world results from their alienation from their real cities. Thus, in Las Vegas Strip, there are simulated urban landscapes upon where visitors enact fantasy lives and ease the emptiness and estrangement derived from conflicted urban identities and poor citizenship. The study is a contribution for understanding the current social crisis of urban identity formation for both the human subject and the public sphere-amid the accelerating metamorphos of our contemporary culture of spectacle, hedonism and consumerism.

Key words

Hyperreality, kitsch, hyperkitsch, spectacle, pleasure, consumption, Las Vegas.
Confusión del día y la noche: hiperrealidad y kitsch en Las Vegas

Resumen

El estudio investiga la producción de la hiperrealidad y de lo kitsch (o de mal gusto) en la última generación de desarrollos turísticos y lugares de apuestas en Las Vegas. En estos ambientes, las distinciones entre los periodos nocturnos y diurnos son intencionalmente desenfocadas o difusas, o hechas insignificantes mediante la manipulación de la creación del espectáculo o la producción de un sentido de la alineación del tiempo y la realidad. La suspensión del tiempo y del espacio real está dirigida a facilitar, tanto la engañosa percepción de una falsa naturaleza construida como a la producción de sitios ideales para el placer y el consumo.

Procedí con esta exploración basándome en dos conceptos analíticos: hiperrealidad y kitsch. A partir de este marco teórico, propongo el término hiperkitsch para indicar el fenómeno en Las Vegas y afirmo que la fascinación que experimentan las personas con la iconografía hiperkitsch relacionada con el ambiente urbano es resultado de la alineación de sus ciudades reales. Es así como en Las Vegas existen paisajes urbanos simulados, donde los visitantes personifican sus vidas de fantasía y desahogan el vacío y la ruptura derivada de sus identidades urbanas conflictivas y su pobre rol de ciudadano. El estudio contribuye al entendimiento de la actual crisis social en la formación de la identidad urbana -desde lo humano y lo público- ante la acelerada metamorfosis de nuestra cultura contemporánea del espectáculo, el hedonismo y el consumismo.

Palabras clave

Hiperrealidad, kitsch, hiperkitsch, espectáculo, placer, consumismo.
ON HYPERREALITY

Today we are experiencing an unprecedented change in how we comprehend the world and act within it. It is ever more difficult to tell the difference between fact and fiction, i.e., between what is real and what is imagined. We are increasingly immersed in a universe of "real-fakes" and "absolutely fake cities," reconstructed fantasy worlds that are "more real than reality" [Eco, 1988]. This blurring of the boundaries between the real and the imagined has produced a new vocabulary aimed at capturing that elusive, yet revolutionary change: reality is no longer what it used to be. The term that has come to be more widely used to define and conceptualize this growing confusion and fusion of the real-and-imagined is "hyperreality." Here, I review this concept to substantiate the claim that in Las Vegas, manipulations of well-known urban icons are exacerbated to its maximum producing a 'hyperreal' environment, which transcends and replaces its original sources of inspiration.

Jean Baudrillard, French sociologist and philosopher, is the most cited and controversial theoretician of hyperreality. He defines simulacra as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality, a hyperreal." Thus, hyperreality elevates simulation to a status of reality [Baudrillard, 1983]. Simulation "has no original or referent, for the model replaces the real" [Ellin, 1996]. These simulated environments become "realer-than-real, a real retouched and refurbished" [Best and Kellner, 1991]. The term hyperreality indicates the loss of the real as we knew it, where distinctions between surface and depth, the real and the imaginary no longer exist. In the hyperreal world, image and reality implode [Sim, 1999].

For Baudrillard, the notion of the hyperreal hinges around "the precession of simulacra": "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth it is the map that precedes the territory-precession of simulacra-it is the map that engenders the territory" [Baudrillard, 1983]. In his book Simulations [1983], Baudrillard discusses this notion of simulacra precession. With a passage from Ecclesiastes, he reminds us of the biblical use of the term simulacrum-a perfect copy of an original that may never have existed-to refer to the belief that the host and wine of communion really are the body and blood of Christ. Thus, "[t]he simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth [...]. The simulacrum is true." It is now "impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real," for "the hyperrealism of simulation is expressed everywhere by the real's striking resemblance to itself." That is, the simulacrum 'precedes' or comes before or ahead of the reality, and defines the real as itself. "For Baudrillard, there are no longer any doubles, any hidden territories to be found beneath the surface. Everything, including the urban imaginary, is now condensed around simulations and simulacra" [Soja, 2000].

According to Baudrillard, simulation "effaces the very difference between the categories true and false, real and imaginary. We no longer have any means of testing pretence against reality, or know which is which. Nor is there any exit from his quandary. To report the change involved, we must say that 'from now on' the 'relationship has been reversed', that the map, as it were, precedes the territory, or the sign the thing. Yet such talk is itself illegitimate, for with simulation rampant even the words that we use 'feign to have what they haven't', i.e., meanings or referents. In fact we do not know the difference between the map and the territory, and would not know it even if we had our noses pressed up against the thing itself" [Bauman, 1888].

Baudrillard distinguish between simulation and dissimulation, the latter being the lies, prevarication, or deceptions that arise from the surface appearance of things. He argues: "To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But the matter is more complicated, since to simulate is not simply to feign ... [for] feigning leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real' and 'imaginary'" [1983]. For Baudrillard, the simulacrum is a metaphor for a new critical epistemology. It implies that images now mask the absence of reality, indicative of a transition from dissimulation to simulation, to the purging of all referentials and the substitution of signs of the real for the real itself. This precession of simulacra threatens the very existence of a difference between true and false, real and imaginary, signifier and signified [Soja, 2000].

Although debatable in Baudrillard's work, an argument can be made that he presents that ultimate state where the image "bears no relation
to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum," as an impending possibility rather than a consummated fact. This argument would allow to open up some opportunities for progressive politics of action and resistance to the prevailing conditions of postmodernity and the contemporary city [Soja, 2000]. While Baudrillard’s notions may be and have been criticized in a number of ways, they undeniably capture a significant aspect of the commodified and mediated nature of our contemporary world in general, and of Las Vegas in particular.

Other scholars have critically engaged Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality, uncovering new perspectives or demystifying its assumed hegemony in processes of cultural production and consumption. Among them, Christine Boyer stretches the notion of hyperreality to question itself. Boyer addresses the expanding sphere of hyperreality in the urban domain in her 1996 book, using the term CyberCities. After problematizing the question of whether the cybercity represents the "final and irreversible erasure of the spatial containers that once stored our icons and images, the dematerialization of the wax into which our memories were once impressed... symbolically bombed into nothingness", as Baudrillard’s understanding of hyperreality poses, Boyer suggests that perhaps these fears are "yet another fiction" [Boyer, 1996]. If it were another fiction, however, we would still be stocked in the impossibility of action/reaction, disempowered by our own fiction. The unfortunate result of this option would be a surrendering with regard to the present urban scene that may rival the immobility of extreme baudrillardism.

Edward Soja, on his part, uses the term Simcities (adapted from the title of a popular computer game) to define this complex restructuring of the urban imaginary brought about by the spread of hyperreality. For Soja, the dynamics embedded in simcities put in place a subtle form of social and spatial regulation, one that "literally and figuratively 'plays with the mind,' manipulating civic consciousness and popular images of cityspace and urban life to maintain order" [Soja, 2000]. Rheingold concords with this disturbing panopticon view of contemporary life, as the natural world and the social order is replaced with a technologically mediated hyperreality, a 'society of the spectacle' and ultimate state of alienation: "We don't see our environment as an artificial construction that uses media to extract our money and power. We see it as 'reality'-the way things are. [...] Hyper-reality is what you get when a Panopticon evolves to the point where it can convince everyone that it doesn't exist; people continue to believe they are free, although their power has disappeared..." [Rheingold, 1993].

Finally, some of the scholars who have engaged the study of urban hyperreality are more upfront regarding their perceived opportunities for progressive politics, and some are profoundly critical of Baudrillard’s views. For instance, In her book Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities, Celeste Olalquiaga depicts a more urban, spatial, and political understanding of hyperreality than Baudrillard's. She argues that, "despite being influenced by Baudrillard's gaze and believing that simulation is fundamental to the understanding of postmodernism, I disagree completely with his final analysis on the disappearance of the referent." Olalquiaga identifies and celebrates the new possibilities for creative resistance and subversion opened up by the spread of hyperreality. Focusing on contemporary Latin American 'magical hyperrealism' and their influence on the 'Latinization of the United States', she suggests that the expanded spatial scope-with its blurred boundaries, broken hierarchies, flexibility and fragmentation-bring about opportunities to engage in a more creative spatial praxis of transgression, boundary crossing, border work, and commitment to the right to be different. Ultimately, these practices could redirect the diffusion of hyperreality from its conservative channels to more progressive objectives [Olalquiaga, 1992].

In his book America, Baudrillard presents the U.S. as a model of hyperreality, where reality has entirely disappeared beneath the seductive surfaces of simulation. But it is in Las Vegas, more than anywhere else, that manipulations of well-known urban icons are exacerbated to its maximum, producing a hyperreal environment, which transcends and replaces its original sources of inspiration. Significantly, the ultimate symbol of the postmodern condition in Baudrillard's America is the desert, rather than the city, "because you are delivered from all depths there—a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference points" [Baudrillard, 1988]. Ironically born in the middle of one of the most inclement deserts in the world—the Mohave Desert-Las Vegas Strip is a perfect
Illustration of a magical space which masks the absence of the real. Las Vegas—which used to be known and is still referred to by many as Sin-city—may be more appropriately nicknamed 'Simcity' (after Soja's term), for in its increasingly rapid trend of simulation creation, reality has been buried and an ever more elusive hyperreal landscape is constantly recreated.

ON KITSCH

The etymology of the term kitsch is uncertain. It is believed that it came into use in the 1860s and 1870s by painters and art dealers in Munich to designate cheap art. Whatever its origin, however, kitsch was and still is a strongly derogatory word. To call something kitsch is usually a way of rejecting it as distasteful, repugnant, or disgusting. There is no single definition of kitsch that is entirely satisfactory. However, we can come close to an understanding of the phenomenon by a socio-historical approach, in which kitsch is best explained as typically modern and, as such, closely linked to cultural industrialization, commodification, and hedonism; and an aesthetic approach, in which kitsch is understood as false art, the production of various forms of "aesthetic lies." The concept centers around the notions of imitation, forgery, counterfeit, and the aesthetics of deception and self-deception. By aestheticizing reality, kitsch defines its goal within a "closed system"—the finite universe of what is already known [Broch, 1969]. The basic feature of the kitsch's aestheticization of reality, however, is the misrepresentation or distortion of the original meanings of the symbols it reappropriates. In Eco's terms, a kitsch product assumes the "garb of an aesthetic experience." Yet, it manifest itself as "something that seems out of place" [Eco, 1989]. In fact, kitsch implies the notion of aesthetic inadequacy, often found in single objects whose formal qualities (material, shape, size, etc.) are inappropriate in relation to their cultural content or intention. Kitsch, however, can mimic with profit the appearance of creative art and architecture. The kitsch designer mimics symbols which have proved successful and have been widely accepted or even turned into stereotypes. Kitsch's stylistic eclecticism thus coopts its artistic 'challengers' using stereotypes for its aesthetically conformist purposes [Calinescu, 1987].

Technologically and aesthetically, kitsch is one of the most typical products of modernity. Kitsch has to do with the modern illusion that beauty may be bought and sold. Kitsch appears at the moment in history when beauty is socially distributed like any other commodity. Once kitsch is technically possible and economically profitable, the proliferation of cheap or not-so-cheap imitations of everything—from primitive or folk art to cities—is limited only by the market. Value is measured directly by the demand for reproductions of objects whose original aesthetic meaning consisted, or should have consisted, in being unique and therefore inimitable [Calinescu, 1987].

Kitsch may be viewed as a reaction against the fears of change caused by modernity and the fracture of chronological time. Under such conditions, kitsch appears as an easy way of 'killing time,' as a pleasurable escape from the banality of work and boredom of leisure, i.e., from the dulness of modern quotidian life. Kitsch attempts to assuage the fear of emptiness and provide a response to the widespread modern sense of spiritual vacuum: it fills the empty time of leisure with 'fun' and it fills empty spaces with an hallucinatory assortment of fascinating appearances. "What constitutes the essence of kitsch is probably its open-ended indeterminacy, its vague 'hallucinatory' power, its spurious dreaminess, its promise of an easy 'catharsis'" [Calinescu, 1987]. Kitsch lends itself to a definition in terms of escapism, a systematic attempt to fly from daily reality. Within the unsettling transformations brought about by modernity, kitsch turned into an aesthetic refuge for people to cope with the forces of uncertainty; in particular, with the substitution of the notions of tradition with the ideal of progress, and the erosion of the notion of linear time. The widespread sense of instability and discontinuity makes instant enjoyment a 'reasonable' thing to strive for. Hence, the drive toward consumption and the whole paradoxical concept of a 'throw-away landscape'.

Kitsch uses avant-garde procedures for purposes of "aesthetic advertising." Architects and interior and set designers in Las Vegas turn into skillful propagandist trying to 'sell' accepted ideological commonplace through historical specific architecture. The cultural content of the buildings becomes kitsch when it assumes a false identity. The aesthetic falsification consists of the use of historically expressive means that have nothing to do with the objective of the building, but is rather the packaging of an ideological message. Nearly everything directly or indirectly associated with 'high culture' can be turned into something fit for immediate consumption—a commodity. Part of
the attractiveness of a kitsch object derives from its commercial availability, from the fact that it can be bought. Even the most elaborated and expensive varieties of kitsch–such as kitsch architecture–contain a built-in self-advertisement, an invitation to possession and ready enjoyment. Kitsch, therefore, is one of the most direct manifestations of the triumphant aesthetics and ethics of consumerism [Calinescu, 1987].

If kitsch emerged as an expression of the taste of the middle class and of its compensatory, spare-time hedonism, as a form of ideology (false aesthetic consciousness) it appeared spontaneously. Then, the prevailing Marxist view that it was deliberately introduced by the upper classes to divert the masses from their revolutionary vocation is fundamentally incorrect, as Calinescu proposes. Yet, an argument could be reintroduced today that, given that the contemporary architectural production of hotel casinos in Las Vegas is in the hands of a few multimillion corporations making colossal profits, their hegemonic practices of social control through architecture do have an impact in preventing the masses from the construction of subjects, leading to false consciousness. Truly enough, this process of alienation is facilitated by a human readiness for self-deception. In the late 1940s, Adorno had already explained it: "People want to have fun. A fully concentrated and conscious experience of art [or architecture] is possible only to those whose lives do not put such a strain on them that in their spare time they want relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously. The whole sphere of cheap commercial entertainment reflects this dual desire. It induces relaxation because it is patterned and pre-digested" [Adorno, 1947].

Thus, the tendency to hedonistic consumption and the effect of alienation creates the "kitschman" [Calinescu, 1987]. A kitsch–(hu)man is one who experience as kitsch even non-kitsch works or situations, involuntarily making a parody of aesthetic response. With her/his hedonistic perspectives of what is artistic or beautiful, the kitsch–human wants to fill his spare time with maximum excitement in exchange for minimum effort. For her or him, the ideal is effortless enjoyment. Yet, to believe the simulation hidden in kitsch is a sign of either undeveloped or atrophied critical sense. The kitsch–human with undeveloped critical sense shows mental passivity and spiritual laziness. However, the undemanding consumer of kitsch can also be subjected to disempowering alienation, showing an atrophied critical sense. Most probably, the two processes are at work. A kitsch work implies a collaboration between the producer and consumer of kitsch, the kitsch–architect and the kitsch–human. The latter wants to be 'beautifully' lied to and the former is willing to do it in exchange for financial gain. In this game of illusions and spurious impressions, the liar eventually may end up believing that what s/he says is the truth, i.e., the kitsch–architect may lose consciousness of her/his intent of producing kitsch.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned discussion, recent cultural studies on kitsch reclaim the subject from the domain of art history. By undertaking an exploration of the cultural history and philosophical connotations of kitsch, this aesthetic phenomenon is uncovered as much more than cheap imitation of art or "pretentious bad taste" [Webster's Dictionary]. Rather, kitsch is recognized as "the ability to surpass essential belongings and rest in more superficial ones, to create an imaginary landscape through accumulation and camouflage, and to crystallize the continuous movement of life in the permeable disguise of fantasy" [Olaquiaga, 1998]. The appeal of kitsch "prods us beyond simple, nostalgic yearnings and sentimentality to irrational acceptance of the impossible or the incongruous" [Brown, 1987].

According to Olaquiaga in her thorough study of kitsch, The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience [1998], the Victorian era and the industrial revolution of the late 19th century were the main ancestors of kitsch. During these periods, people stuffed their homes with fantasy-themed artifacts to fill the existential emptiness brought about by rapid industrialization. Olaquiaga claims that our fascination with kitsch items inspired in the natural world results from our alienation from nature. Thus, we are left with the attempt to repossess the experience of intensity through artificial objects that give the illusion to capture life, however inexactely. Proposing that kitsch is therefore the product of a larger sensibility of loss, Celeste Olaquiaga claims that it enables the momentary re-creation of experiences that exist only as memories or fantasies. Sadly, the effort of repossessing is always frustrated, since kitsch oscillates constantly between the embodiment of lived experience and its loss.
"Kitzsch is the scattered fragments of the aura, traces of dream images turned loose from their matrix... covering the emptiness left by both the aura's demise and modernity's failure to deliver its promise of a radiant future. [...] Kitzsch is the leftover of modernity's own dreams of transcendence, a remnant loaded simultaneously with hopes and the impossibility of their realization, a ruin."

In keeping with the demands of an affluent consumer society, the boundaries of kitsch have expanded dramatically in our times, ranging from all forms of kitsch 'art' to kitsch 'architecture' and 'urbanism', i.e., from objects that we can possess, to spaces that we can inhabit. In addition, in our times kitsch has become increasingly associated with the works of the tourist industry. The Yugoslavian philosopher Gillo Dorfles stated it bluntly: "tourism is the home of kitsch." As Dorfles sees the relationship between tourists and the environment as rarely genuine, "it is this veil of falseness, imitation and admiring sentimentality that more often than not makes the world, as it appears to the tourist, vomit kitsch all over itself" [Dorfles, 1969]. Kitsch architecture in Las Vegas, however, not only does suggest richness and superfluity, but also is deceivingly inexpensive to consume. Hotel prices are considerably cheap for the high standard of services they offer. However, the average visitor spends—or waste—a lot more money than she/he anticipated in her/his stay participating in gambling and entertaining activities. This is precisely the goal of investors. On the other hand, these palaces of consumption and deception are anything but cheap to produce and maintain, as some hotel/casino costs and dimensions of operation would immediately put in evidence.

ON HYPERKITSCHE

A downfall of the natural order in the nineteenth century triggered a longing for and glorification of what had been lost. Then, the notion of 'nature' and 'traditions' were reproduced either fossilized or abstracted, with industry and science inventing ways to retain their evanescent realm. Olalquiaga claims that the production of objects aiming to recapture nature and traditions under these circumstances, only showed the demise of their aura's authenticity—i.e., they were kitsch. What was quickly disappearing "was idealized as containing an essence whose appeal increased in direct relation to its experienced decrease."

"Kitzsch is nothing if not a suspended memory whose elusiveness is made ever more keen by its extreme iconicity. Despite appearances, kitsch is not an active commodity naively infused with the desire of a wish image, but rather a failed commodity that continually speaks of all it has ceased to be—a virtual image, existing in the impossibility of fully being. Kitsch is a time capsule with a two-way ticket to the realm of myth—the collective or individual land of dreams. Here, for a second or perhaps even a few minutes, there reigns an illusion of completeness, a universe devoid of past and future, a moment whose sheer intensity is to a large degree predicated on its very inexistence. This desperately sought moment, this secret treasure buried at the bottom of the sea, taints all waking experience with a deep-felt longing, as if one lived but to encounter once again this primal, archaic pleasure of total connection" [Olalquiaga, 1998].

I argue that kitsch is a phenomenon more relevant to our own time than it was to the era that made it a massive experience, because the conditions of large sensibilities of loss first experienced amidst the industrial revolution have all but unprecedentedly grow in our present world. Therefore, extrapolating both in time and realm of experience from Olalquiaga's work, it is my claim that today the downfall of the quality of the urban environment and the urban life in American cities in the last half century has triggered a longing for and glorification of what has been lost. I contend that people's fascination with hyperkitsch iconography that connects to the urban world results from their alienation from their cities. Again, building sciences and (tourist and entertainment) industries combine to recreate and 'perfect' the city's role as a bearer of human and social urban identities. The architectural complexes offered to soothe this longing for an authentic city flavor in Las Vegas evoke-through heavily charged multimedia imagery—an intensity of unconscious feelings, reminiscences and remembrances. When hotel/casinos in Las Vegas simulate cities, they provide a uniquely effective media for the recreation of evanescent fantasies and recollections of particular times and spaces. The more these very notions of time and space become ambiguous and fragmented in the global era, the greater the urge to crystallize idealized notions of time and 'placeness'. 
"It is in this intrinsic contradiction between a
desire and the preclusion of its unfolding that the
dialectics of kitsch take place, moving between
an irretrievable past and a fragmented present,
at home only in the certainty of its own
impossibility. [...] The impossibility of
recovering what is lost only exacerbates the
efforts towards its achievement and, since the
desired goal is extremely elusive... the search is
guaranteed as a permanent condition. It is
through this hopeless search that loss becomes
commodified, made to substitute for the real
thing" [Olalquiaga, 1998].

When kitsch substitutes real things by
commodified loss, hyperreality is created. In
postmodern cultural sensibility, kitsch thus turns
to be one of the most appropriate media by which
the previous beliefs in originality, authenticity, and
symbolic depth are challenged by an eclectic
appreciation of surface and alegorical values.
This move does not get rid of reality. Rather, it
promotes a "broadening of the notion of reality,
whereby vicariousness is not longer felt as false
or secondhand but rather as an autonomous,
however incredible, dimension of the real"
[Olalquiaga, 1992]. Moler names this
phenomenon "neokitsch" [Moler, 1971]; and
Olalquiaga calls it a "second-grade kitsch" or
"kitsch-kitsch". For them, this new dimension of
kitsch collapses the different between reality and
representation, making the latter the only
possible referent. This self-referential kitsch-a
kitsch-kitsch-defamiliarizes the traditional notion
of reality, turning representation itself into the real
[Olalquiaga, 1992]. Thus established the link
between kitsch and hyperreality, I propose an
even better tailored hybrid word for our
discussion, the term "hyperkitsch".

In Las Vegas Strip, historically loaded, yet
debased landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower, the
St. Mark's Square and Campanile, or the Imperial
Roman Forum become devoid of their original
socio-historical and cultural meaning and are
repackaged to millions of visitors as mere sites of
gambling and consumption. That rupture of
historical continuity to commercial dooddad
equates betting and buying in comfort with the
hyperkitsch illusion of participating in a
historically or contemporary authentic urban
experience.

NIGHTTIME WORLD-CLASS CITIES,
LAS VEGAS' STYLE

Since the advent of urban electrification -more
than a century ago now- night in the city has
been understood and studied as a site with
numerous meanings and possibilities: pleasure,
terror, escape, reclamation, visibility, invisibility,
surveillance, crime, insurrection, consumption,
containment, and chaos, among others. For the
first half of the twentieth century, Las Vegas
touched upon all of those aspects. The city was
indeed an excessive, dangerous, promiscuous
warren of spaces ran by mobs, where pleasure
was seasoned with danger, and where desire and
illegality ran free in alleyways, clubs, bars,
théatres, music halls and gambling dens. During
those first decades of the twentieth century, red-
light districts flourished, and Las Vegas earned a
reputation of "Sin City."

Many transformations of the urban landscape
have followed, which can be analyzed as distinct
generations of hotel-casino styles in Las Vegas.
First, there were the relative low-key casino
buildings inspired by Western imagery and
dressed up in extravagant neon signs, which
catered to adults only. Then came the Flamingo
Hotel by Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, which
introduced Hollywood imagery and modern
glamour in the 1940s and 1950s. This trend
diversified the adult clientele, and opened great
opportunities for show business in Las Vegas. A
new era was going to be introduced by the
ground-breaking opening of Ancient Roman-
themed Caesars Palace in 1966, pared with the
family-oriented Circus-Circus in 1968, both by
visionary Jay Sarno.

In 1969, new regulation allowed corporations to
own the casinos, and a handful of risky
entrepreneurs aimed to bring legitimacy and
radical transformation to Las Vegas
entertainment industry and landscape. Rapidly,
Las Vegas was transformed in a site of a purified,
space offfor pleasure inhabited by a well-
regulated population. Transgressive pleasure
was put into line and offered up as a package of
commodified contentment. The calculated,
rationalized, and repetitive programmes for the
new multimillion, overabundantly themed hotel
casinos in Las Vegas have often been inspired by
stereotyped images, remembrances, and
reminiscences of past and present city
experiences. These simplified, conforming
images are provided in place of complex urban
experiences arising out of the juxtapositions and accumulations of human histories and schemes, derived from a multitude of spontaneous encounters and sudden glimpses of architectural oddities and bustling public spaces in cities. For each city-themed hotel casino in Las Vegas is populated, not by the spontaneous movements of urban inhabitants, but by those carefully induced movements of tourists and gamblers. The cities thus cartooned, became not a complex of compelling spaces of surprises, but a series of packaged, predictable zones of enjoyment [Rose, 2000]. In this theming operation, the signifiers of 'night and the city' as a space-and-time atmosphere of multiple and adventurous meanings and (transgressing) opportunities have been coopted by the masters of place-making in Las Vegas, to produce contained and controlled spaces where clients can act out their nightlife fantasies in a deceivingly safe environment. These environments are not really risk-free, however, because bad luck and induced excess -e.g., in gambling, drinking, or making out- can drive a person to her ruin, just as it may happen in the 'real' city streets.

The Jay Sarno of the first generation of themed and mass appealing hotels of the late 1960s and 1970s, found its successor in Steve Wynn, who has been a key agent in the transformation of Las Vegas in an all-purpose, family oriented destination resort. His hotel complexes The Mirage (1989) and Treasure Island (1993) have strongly reaffirmed and sophisticated themed architecture in Las Vegas as the new style of hotel casinos. With the volcano show at The Mirage and the Bucanier Bay Sea Battle at Treasure Island, the sign designers of Las Vegas have been definitely replaced by the show designers as the main masters of image making.

Throughout the 1990's, the opening of each new hotel in Las Vegas prompted a dramatic increase in room occupancy. The city has now over 100 thousand hotel rooms. This trend culminates on the avenue known as The Strip: more than two-thirds of all Las Vegas visitors stay at properties on or adjacent to The Strip. Attracting more than 33 million visitors each year, Las Vegas Strip is an astonishing hypersite theme park set to evoke images of idealized world-class cities. The designers dispensed with history, to sell instead a new present: improved 'urban realities' within tightly controlled spaces. In The Strip, megagraphics, neon lighting, mega billboard signage, show performances, and dramatic architecture combine to intensify a constructed urban experience and tie it to entertainment and retail themes of contemporary world-class cities of other latitudes or times.

As this study investigates the production of hyperkitsch in the last generation of hotels in Las Vegas, I start by focusing on two specific examples of urban-ish re-creations (hyperrealities) of nighttime Rome and New York: The Forum Shops at Caesar's Palace Hotel/Casino, and the interior of the New York-New York Hotel/Casino. I believe these two hotels esta-blished a new fad in hotel design in The Strip, and have since then become recurrent precedents for the new complexes.

**Caesar's Palace**

The first and the oldest casino hotel in Las Vegas which started the trend towards theme
experiences arising out of the juxtapositions and accumulations of human histories and schemes, derived from a multitude of spontaneous encounters and sudden glimpses of architectural oddities and bustling public spaces in cities. For each city-themed hotel casino in Las Vegas is populated, not by the spontaneous movements of urban inhabitants, but by those carefully induced movements of tourists and gamblers. The cities thus cartooned, became not a complex of compelling spaces of surprises, but a series of packaged, predictable zones of enjoyment [Rose, 2000]. In this theming operation, the signifiers of ‘night and the city’ as a space-and-time atmosphere of multiple and adventurous meanings and (transgressing) opportunities have been coopted by the masters of place-making in Las Vegas, to produce contained and controlled spaces where clients can act out their nightlife fantasies in a deceptively safe environment. These environments are not really risk-free, however, because bad luck and induced excess - e.g., in gambling, drinking, or making out - can drive a person to her ruin, just as it may happen in the ‘real’ city streets.

Throughout the 1990’s, the opening of each new hotel in Las Vegas prompted a dramatic increase in room occupancy. The city has now over 100 thousand hotel rooms. This trend culminates on the avenue known as The Strip: more than two-thirds of all Las Vegas visitors stay at properties on or adjacent to The Strip. Attracting more than 33 million visitors each year, Las Vegas Strip is an astonishing hypersite theme park set to evoke images of idealized world-class cities. The designers dispensed with history, to sell instead a new present: improved ‘urban realities’ within tightly controlled spaces. In The Strip, megagraphics, neon lighting, mega billboard signage, show performances, and dramatic architecture combine to intensify a constructed urban experience and tie it to entertainment and retail themes of contemporary world-class cities of other latitudes or times.

The Jay Sarno of the first generation of themed and mass appealing hotels of the late 1960s and 1970s, found its successor in Steve Wynn, who has been a key agent in the transformation of Las Vegas in an all-purpose, family oriented destination resort. His hotel complexes The Mirage (1989) and Treasure Island (1993) have strongly reaffirmed and sophisticated themed architecture in Las Vegas as the new style of hotel casinos. With the volcano show at The Mirage and the Bucanneer Bay Sea Battle at Treasure Island, the sign designers of Las Vegas have been definitely replaced by the show designers as the main masters of image making.

As this study investigates the production of hyperkitsch in the last generation of hotels in Las Vegas, I start by focusing on two specific examples of urban-ish re-creations (hyperrealities) of nighttime Rome and New York: The Forum Shops at Caesar’s Palace Hotel/Casino, and the interior of the New York-New York Hotel/Casino. I believe these two hotels esta-blished a new fad in hotel design in The Strip, and have since then become recurrent precedents for the new complexes.

Caesar’s Palace

The first and the oldest casino hotel in Las Vegas which started the trend towards theme
architecture and family entertainment is Caesars Palace. Since its opening in 1966, Caesars Palace has been one of the very few hotels from the 1960s which has been able to keep up with the rapid pace of transformation in Las Vegas, partly because it has been able to successfully renovate itself accordingly. Caesars Palace conveys the imaginary golden era of the Imperial Roman Empire through paraphernalia saturated with clichéd signifiers: columns, fountains, statues, etc. It attempts to create a world resplendent in regal pleasures, offering lavish service, accommodations, cuisine, recreational opportunities, and entertainment events. Caesars Palace is an example of nostalgic kitsch embodied not in the building, but in an entire experience. In Olalquiaga’s words:

"Kitsch is a spell to which one succumbs willingly, knowing its delicate fabric can disintegrate with the slightest interference, who knows when to be reconfigured again. An interregnum, kitsch drifts between waking and sleeping hours, half dream and half reality, all memory and desire. [...] Kitsch is the world as we would like it to be, not as it is; the capturing in a concrete thing of the most ineffable feelings and tenderest emotions" [Olalquiaga, 1998; my emphasis].

Olalquiaga claims that nostalgic kitsch sacrifices the potential plurality of meanings. It is a "shrunk sign", reduced to its most basic and benign expression. "Nostalgic kitsch is static, it doesn't move, it just oscillates back and forth between the glorified experience and its subject, without any transformation" [Olalquiaga, 1998]. As nostalgic kitsch, Caesars Palace’s advertisement depicts it as "the most indulgent society ever." Other socio-political realities of that historical Roman Empire, i.e., other meanings and experiences and the meanings and experiences of ‘others’, are forced out. In any case, this formula of nostalgic hyperkitsch in Caesars Palace in Las Vegas has been so successful, that siblings have been created in Atlantic City, Tahoe, and Indiana.

In Caesars Palace, the list of kitsch detailing in the impossible effort of theming a contemporary hotel on ancient Roman style seems endless. However, I concentrate on the most recent addition to the themed complex: the Caesars Forum Shops, a 200,000 square feet, $110 million structure. The Forum is an outrageous mix of shopping mall and entertainment center that started a new trend in Las Vegas: the blurring of night and day time. At the Forum, people live the outmost illusion when the outside is brought inside: the Forum has a ceiling that simulates the sky. As programmed lighting simulates the transitions from dawn to dusk every hour, an atmosphere with its own surreal temporality is created. As the ceiling-sky changes from night to day at an accelerated pace, it subverts biological time clocks, catalyzing the anxiety of consumerism. The blurring of nighttime and daytime puts the shoppers in an atemporal state of (un)consciousness, compelling people to lose track of the time spent there, leading to the prolongation of their visit.

In the Forum Shops at Caesars, the piazzas, statuary, fountains, and façades attempt to simulate the streets of historic Rome. Mythology itself is turned into a repetitive spectacle. An advertisement claims: "The gods themselves smile on The Forum Shops, coming alive at the Festival Fountain and at the Atlantis attraction every hour from later morning through late evening seven days a week." Indeed, to the astonishment of observers, these statues surprisingly start moving and talking at certain show times. If one imagine that those amazingly kitschified statues are there to evoke the ones artists from Imperial Rome or from Italian
architecture and family entertainment is Caesars Palace. Since its opening in 1966, Caesars Palace has been one of the very few hotels from the 1960s which has been able to keep up with the rapid pace of transformation in Las Vegas, partly because it has been able to successfully renovate itself accordingly. Caesars Palace conveys the imaginary golden era of the imperial Roman Empire through paraphernalia saturated with clichéd signifiers: columns, fountains, statues, etc. It attempts to create a world resplendent in regal pleasures, offering lavish service, accommodations, cuisine, recreational opportunities, and entertainment events. Caesars Palace is an example of nostalgic kitsch embodied not in the building, but in an entire experience. In Olalquiaga's words:

"Kitsch is a spell to which one succumbs willingly, knowing its delicate fabric can disintegrate with the slightest interference, who knows when to be reconfigured again. An interregnum, kitsch drifts between waking and sleeping hours, half dream and half reality, all memory and desire. [...] Kitsch is the world as we would like it to be, not as it is: the capturing in a concrete thing of the most ineffable feelings and tenderest emotions" [Olalquiaga, 1998; my emphasis].

Olalquiaga claims that nostalgic kitsch sacrifices the potential plurality of meanings. It is a "shrunken sign", reduced to its most basic and benign expression. "Nostalgic kitsch is static, it doesn't move, it just oscillates back and forth between the glorified experience and its subject, without any transformation" [Olalquiaga, 1998]. As nostalgic kitsch, Caesars Palace's advertisement depicts it as "the most indulgent society ever." Other socio-political realities of that historical Roman Empire, i.e., other meanings and experiences and the meanings and experiences of 'others', are forced out. In any case, this formula of nostalgic hyperkitsch in Caesars Palace in Las Vegas has been so successful, that siblings have been created in Atlantic City, Tahoe, and Indiana.

In Caesars Palace, the list of kitsch detailing in the impossible effort of theming a contemporary hotel on ancient Roman style seems endless. However, I concentrate on the most recent addition to the themed complex: the Caesars Forum Shops, a 200,000 square feet, $110 million structure. The Forum is an outrageous mix of shopping mall and entertainment center that started a new trend in Las Vegas: the blurring of night and day time. At the Forum, people live the outmost illusion when the outside is brought inside: the Forum has a ceiling that simulates the sky. As programmed lighting simulates the transitions from dawn to dusk every hour, an atmosphere with its own surreal temporality is created. As the ceiling-sky changes from night to day at an accelerated pace, it subverts biological time clocks, catalyzing the anxiety of consumerism. The blurring of nighttime and daytime puts the shoppers in an atemporal state of (un)consciousness, compelling people to lose track of the time spent there, leading to the prolongation of their visit. In the Forum Shops at Caesars, the piazzas, statuary, fountains, and façades attempt to simulate the streets of historic Rome. Mythology itself is turned into a repetitive spectacle. An advertisement claims: "The gods themselves smile on The Forum Shops, coming alive at the Festival Fountain and at the Atlantis attraction every hour from later morning through late evening seven days a week." Indeed, to the astonishment of observers, these statues surprisingly start moving and talking at certain show times. If one imagine that those amazingly kitschified statues are there to evoke the ones artists from Imperial Rome or from Italian
Baroque or Renaissance-such as Borromini, Brunelleschi, or Michelangelo-made, one could really feel a deep sense of despair or nausea.

Caesars Palace offers another hyperkitsch environment for entertainment-Caesars Magical Empire. It combines dining with show and architectural spectacle in a stage reminiscent of Caesar’s world 2,000 years ago. The rhetorics of the advertisement reinforces the mythical aspects of Imperial Rome, and sets the experience in an atemporal time filled with mystery and magic:

“Enter through the Celestial Court, the gateway to this enchanting new world. Your adventure begins in the Chamber of Destiny, where the story of Caesars Magical Empire is told as you experience an environmental illusion that spirits you along an underground catacomb. You will be guided through Catacomb Maze, past intriguing artifacts and imposing doorways, to one of ten dining chambers of the Gods. Here a sumptuous three-course feast is served to the 24-chamber guests as a sorcerer weaves magic spells before them. [...] After you have been charmed by all the wonders of Caesars Magical Empire, pass through the Infinity Hallway, a final phantasm that transports you back to reality. We hope your virtual visit to Caesars Magical Empire will conjure you to our mystical realm again and again”. [caesars.com, 2001; my emphasis]

New York - New York

Two big corporations (MGM Grand and Primadonna Resorts, Inc.) teamed up to create the New York-New York Hotel & Casino, a $350-million, 2024-room complex in 1996. Hailed as “the greatest city in Las Vegas”, this collage property re-creates America’s most paradigmatic metropolis. Why would a person visit the real New York City now if s/he can have its best pieces collaged and sanitized in Las Vegas?. In fact, NY-NY manages to package a 300-foot-long Brooklyn Bridge, a 150-foot-tall Statue of Liberty, and twelve New York-styled hotel towers, featuring the iconic Chrysler, AT&T, and Empire State buildings.

Coney Island Emporium provides an array of amusing activities at NY-NY, including interactive laser tag, virtual reality games, and all the latest simulators: futuristic attractions set against the sights, sounds, and thrills of old time New York. A roller coaster surrounds all the attractions of the hotel, adding “urban” noise and thrill to the atmosphere. The 84,000 square foot Central Park-themed casino, the charm of Greenwich Village streetscape, and the excitement of Times Square are all collapsed together under a simulated star-filled night—an impossible sight for Manhattan.

Aside of all the obvious kitsch and grand hyperreality, three incredible details gives a more subtle idea of the dimension of hiperkitschification at New York-New York. First, the domestic scaling of urban furniture and details. At the Greenwich Village simulation, there are scaled-down buildings, with cute little windows depicting flowery curtains and semi-open blinds, street lights and signs. More surprisingly, mailboxes and other street furniture portray characteristic New Yorker street art or graffiti, in what constitutes an outrageous cooptation of a quintessential language of urban reaction and resistance.

Second, the collapsing of iconography of different domains of meanings in the decoration of the casino. Maybe the most uncanny of the examples is Marilyn Monroe’s enactment of the Statue of Liberty. Monroe, the mythical goddess of American pop-culture in the posture of one of her most famous and suggestive photographs is yet attired as the most respected woman of American symbolism: Mrs. Liberty. Holding up her fake flame, Monroe conveys the deceptive message that in the land of the hyperreal “big apple,” people can have it all-i.e., there is no need for them to yield passions, desires, and compulsory gambling, in the pursuit of the most supreme of moral values.
Baroque or Renaissance—such as Borromini, Brunelleschi, or Michelangelo—made, one could really feel a deep sense of despair or nausea.

Caesars Palace offers another hyperkitsch environment for entertainment—Caesars Magical Empire. It combines dining with show and architectural spectacle in a stage reminiscent of Caesar’s world 2,000 years ago. The rhetorics of the advertisement reinforces the mythical aspects of Imperial Rome, and sets the experience in an atemporal time filled with mystery and magic.

"Enter through the Celestial Court, the gateway to this enchanting new world. Your adventure begins in the Chamber of Destiny, where the story of Caesars Magical Empire is told as you experience an environmental illusion that spirits you along an underground catacomb. You will be guided through Catacomb Maze, past intriguing artifacts and imposing doorways, to one of ten dining chambers of the Gods. Here a sumptuous three-course feast is served to the 24-chamber guests as a sorcerer weaves magic spells before them. [...] After you have been charmed by all the wonders of Caesars Magical Empire, pass through the Infinity Hallway; a final phantasm that transports you back to reality. We hope your virtual visit to Caesars Magical Empire will conjure you to our mystical realm again and again" [caesars.com, 2001; my emphasis]

New York—New York

Two big corporations (MGM Grand and Primmadonna Resorts, Inc.) teamed up to create the New York-New York Hotel & Casino, a $350-million, 2,042-room complex in 1996. Hailed as "the greatest city in Las Vegas", this colossus property re-creates America’s most paradigmatic metropolis. Why would a person visit the real New York City now if s/he can have its best pieces collaged and sanitized in Las Vegas? In fact, NY-NY manages to package a 300-foot-long Brooklyn Bridge, a 150-foot-tall Statue of Liberty, and twelve New York-styled hotel towers, featuring the iconic Chrysler, AT&T, and Empire State buildings.

Coney Island Emporium provides an array of amusing activities at NY-NY, including interactive laser tag, virtual reality games, and all the latest simulators: futuristic attractions set against the sights, sounds, and thrills of old-time New York. A roller coaster surrounds all the attractions of the hotel, adding "urban" noise and thrill to the atmosphere. The 84,000 square foot Central Park-themed casino, the charm of Greenwich Village streetscape, and the excitement of Times Square are all collapsed together under a simulated star-filled night—an impossible sight for Manhattan.

Aside of all the obvious kitsch and grand hyperreality, three incredible details give a more subtle idea of the dimension of hiperkitschification at New York-New York. First, the domestic scaling of urban furniture and details. At the Greenwich Village simulation, there are scaled-down buildings, with cute little windows depicting flowery curtains and semi-open blinds, street lights and signs. More surprisingly, mailboxes and other street furniture portray characteristic New Yorker street art or graffiti, in what constitutes an outrageous cooptation of a quintessential language of urban reaction and resistance.

Second, the collapsing of iconography of different domains of meanings in the decoration of the casino. Maybe the most uncanny of the examples is Marilyn Monroe's enactment of the Statue of Liberty. Monroe, the mythical goddess of American pop-culture in the posture of one of her most famous and suggestive photographs is yet attired as the most respected woman of American symbolism: Mrs. Liberty. Holding up her fake flame, Monroe conveys the deceptive message that in the land of the hyperreal "big apple," people can have it all—i.e. there is no need for them to yield passions, desires, and compulsive gambling, in the pursuit of the most supreme of moral values.
Finally, the attempt of the reproduction at different scales of the 'essence' of New York. From a cramp of skyscrapers at the outside façade to the nittygritty recreation of Greenwich Village in the inside. Yet, this hallucinatory game with scale reaches its ultimate expression in a souvenir selling cart: within a skyscraper-like hotel, a souvenir-selling cart designed with motifs of skyscrapers, selling skyscraper souvenirs. This chain of simulations signal the apoplectic triumph of kitsch: the dissolution of the distinction between nostalgic kitsch (i.e., cultural fossils) and melancholic kitsch (souvenirs), in one continuum realm of hyperreality.4

In Las Vegas Strip, besides the aforementioned re-creations of Rome and New York, there are essentialized urban microcosms of Paris, Venice, Monte Carlo, and other places. In many of these environments, the distinctions between daytime and nighttime are purposely blurred or made insignificant for the creation of spectacle and the production of a sense of alienation from time and reality. The blurring of nighttime and daytime that started in The Forum Shops at Caesars Palace, and followed at the New York-New York, has become a mandated feature in the new resort casino complexes in Las Vegas. Today, The Venetian, The Paris Las Vegas, and Aladdins, are among the newer hotels that feature an ever perfected in-door versions of 'natural' (nighttime).

"Graceful arched bridges, flowing canals, vibrant piazzas and welcoming stone walkways capture the spirit of Venice in faithful detail. Stroll beneath the majestic colonnades of the Doge's Palace and enter the Grand Casino. Linger along the Rialto Bridge and gaze across the lagoon. Join the masked Carnivale performers who revel in St. Mark's Square. Pass beneath the soaring 315-foot high Campanile Bell Tower and discover the Grand Canal Shoppes. Enjoy the welcome of The Venetian's magnificent piazza, the place where your visit to this fabulous city within a city begins. [...] From the gondola-filled lagoon that beckons to visitors all along the famous Las Vegas Strip to full-scale reproductions of well-known architectural landmarks, The Venetian re-creates the glory and grandeur of Renaissance Venice, providing hospitality and entertainment in a lively streetscape setting" [venetian.com, 2001; my emphasis].

Strolling down stone walkways along the simulation of nearly a quarter mile of Venice's famed Grand Canal, visitors are seduced not only by the compelling recreation of Venice, but also by a selective collection of stores and boutiques. The sense of an open air experience culminates at St. Mark's Square. In this piazza, beneath a 70-foot ceiling filled with the ever-changing Venetian sky, a mix of shops, cafes and live performances is meant to "truly attain the level of Venice in Vegas".

The Venetian

Located at the very center of Las Vegas Strip on the former site of the legendary Sands Hotel (which was torn down to open room for this new hotel), The Venetian is a $2 billion, 3,036-suite luxury resort inspired by the splendor of Italy's so-called most romantic city: Venice. A destination within a destination, according to the advertisement, "the world's most romantic city is now in the heart of the world's most exciting destination location." At The Venetian, life is explicitly conceived of as spectacle, a mise en scène. It "all come together to create one of the world's truly great resorts, a center stage for the theater of life and the best it has to offer. [...] Discover Venice at its finest and Las Vegas at its finest" [venetian.com, 2001; my emphasis]. "Built virtually to scale of the original," according to Time Magazine, The Venetian reproduces the legendary city's most storied landmarks and rituals:

Moreover, the experience of Venice at The Venetian is projected beyond the immediacy of the hyperkitsch tridimensional environment. Thus, the Theater of Sensation at The Venetian features, among other virtual rides, one called "Escape from Venice." The hyperkitsch trip whirls
Finally, the attempt of the reproduction at different scales of the 'essence' of New York. From a cramp of skyscrapers at the outside façade to the nittygritty recreation of Greenwich Village in the inside. Yet, this hallucinatory game with scale reaches its ultimate expression in a souvenir selling cart: within a skyscraper-like hotel, a souvenir-selling cart designed with motifs of skyscrapers, selling skyscraper souvenirs. This chain of simulations signal the apoplectic triumph of kitsch: the dissolution of the distinction between nostalgic kitsch (i.e., cultural fossils) and melancholic kitsch (souvenirs), in one continuum realm of hyperreality.

In Las Vegas Strip, besides the aforementioned re-creations of Rome and New York, there are essentialized urban microcosms of Paris, Venice, Monte Carlo, and other places. In many of these environments, the distinctions between nighttime and daytime are purposely blurred or made insignificant for the creation of spectacle and the production of a sense of alienation from time and reality. The blurring of nighttime and daytime that started in The Forum Shops at Caesars Palace, and followed at the New York-New York, has become a mandated feature in the new resort casino complexes in Las Vegas. Today, The Venetian, The Paris Las Vegas, and Aladdin, are among the newer hotels that feature an ever perfected in-door versions of 'natural' (nighttime).

"Graceful arched bridges, flowing canals, vibrant piazzas and welcoming stone walkways capture the spirit of Venice in faithful detail. Stroll beneath the majestic colonnades of the Doge's Palace and enter the Grand Casino. Linger along the Rialto Bridge and gaze across the lagoon. Join the masked Carnivale performers who revel in St. Mark's Square. Pass beneath the soaring 315-foot high Campanile Bell Tower and discover the Grand Canal Shoppes. Enjoy the welcome of The Venetian's magnificent piazza, the place where your visit to this fabulous city within a city begins. [...] From the gondola-filled lagoon that beckons to visitors all along the famous Las Vegas Strip to full-scale reproductions of well-known architectural landmarks, The Venetian re-creates the glory and grandeur of Renaissance Venice, providing hospitality and entertainment in a lively streetscape setting" [venetian.com. 2001; my emphasis]

Strolling down stone walkways along the simulation of nearly a quarter mile of Venice's famed Grand Canal, visitors are seduced not only by the compelling recreation of Venice, but also by a selective collection of stores and boutiques. The sense of an open air experience culminates at St. Mark's Square. In this piazza, beneath a 70-foot ceiling filled with the ever-changing Venetian sky, a mix of shops, cafes and live performances is meant to "truly attain the level of Venice in Vegas".

The Venetian

Located at the very center of Las Vegas Strip on the former site of the legendary Sands Hotel (which was torn down to open room for this new hotel), The Venetian is a $2 billion, 3,036-suite luxury resort inspired by the splendor of Italy's so-called most romantic city: Venice. A destination within a destination, according to the advertisement, "the world's most romantic city is now in the heart of the world's most exciting destination location." At The Venetian, life is explicitly conceived of as spectacle, a mise en scene. It "all come together to create one of the world's truly great resorts, a center stage for the theater of life and the best it has to offer. [...] Discover Venice at its finest and Las Vegas at its finest" [venetian.com, 2001; my emphasis]. "Built virtually to scale of the original," according to Time Magazine, The Venetian reproduces the legendary city's most storied landmarks and rituals:

St. Mark's Square at The Venetian

Moreover, the experience of Venice at The Venetian is projected beyond the immediacy of the hyperkitsch tridimensional environment. Thus, the Theater of Sensation at The Venetian features, among other virtual rides, one called "Escape from Venice." The hyperkitsch trip whirls
past, present and future time to produce a new "real time," which takes visitors on "a mystical virtual gondola ride to a mysterious Venetian Carnival and through a time portal to King Tut's Tomb." The ride starts in the Las Vegas Laboratory of a mad scientist who invents a Titan Continuum Engine, which suddenly whisks people to old Venice, where a medieval Venetian carnival is underway. Then, the virtual gondola takes riders to ancient Egypt, where the gods of Egypt offer up precious secrets inside the Giant Pyramid. Surprisingly enough, the realm of hyperreality acquire mind blowing dimensions in Las Vegas, if you realize that you do not need a virtual gondola to get from medieval and renaissance Venice to ancient Egypt. Rather, a real walk or a short taxi ride would suffice to take you from The Venetian to Luxor Las Vegas, only minutes apart from each other in The Strip.

The Luxor

In Las Vegas Strip, not only the simulacra of contemporary cities can be visited. You can also go back in time-in less than 10 minutes-to the golden era of Hollywood in the 1950s (at MGM Grand, "the city of entertainment"); medieval England (at Excalibur); or ancient Egypt (at The Luxor).

The Luxor hotel is a $375 million extravaganza that opened in 1993. Architectural critics Anderson and Chase said about it: "If you thought your post-modern palettes could deal with any bizarre combination of deracinated cultural images-the blurring of simulacra and reality, of ancient and futuristic, of virtual, superficial, and material-wait until you see The Luxor" [Anderson and Chase, 1997]. The Luxor depicts a giant Sphinx of Giza, the avenue of the Sphinxes, an obelisk, and the Keops Pyramid in black glass. The Pharaoh's Pavilion, located one level above the casino, is the gateway to the world's largest atrium, displaying a world all its own within the pyramid, a pastiche of past and present, West and Easter civilizations. The Luxor also features IMAX movies and ride films with ancient Egyptian themes, such as "Mysteries of Egypt" or "In Search for the Obelisk." In addition, there is a virtual-reality Roller Coaster that ride people through the movie "The Greatest Pharaohs."

The Sphinx of Gizat at The Luxor Hotel

The term 'authenticity' acquired a distorted meaning at Luxor Las Vegas' Tomb and Museum of King Tutankhamun. It features an expert Egyptologists-supervised reproduction of tutankhamun's tomb as it revealed itself to Howard Carter on November 22, 1922:

Pyramid's interior at Luxor Hotel
past, present and future time to produce a new "real time," which takes visitors on "a mystical virtual gondola ride to a mysterious Venetian Carnival and through a time portal to King Tut's Tomb." The ride starts in the Las Vegas Laboratory of a mad scientist who invents a Titan Continuum Engine, which suddenly whisks people to old Venice, where a medieval Venetian carnival is underway. Then, the virtual gondola takes riders to ancient Egypt, where the gods of Egypt offer up precious secrets inside the Giant Pyramid. Surprisingly enough, the realm of hyperreality acquire mind blowing dimensions in Las Vegas, if you realize that you do not need a virtual gondola to get from medieval and renaissance Venice to ancient Egypt. Rather, a real walk or a short taxi ride would suffice to take you from The Venetian to Luxor Las Vegas, only minutes apart from each other in The Strip.

The Luxor

In Las Vegas Strip, not only the simulacra of contemporary cities can be visited. You can also go back in time-in less than 10 minutes-to the golden era of Hollywood in the 1950s (at MGM Grand, "the city of entertainment"); medieval England (at Excalibur); or ancient Egypt (at The Luxor).

The Luxor hotel is a $375 million extravaganza that opened in 1993. Architectural critics Anderson and Chase said about it: "If you thought your post-modern palettes could deal with any bizarre combination of deracinated cultural images-the blurring of simulacra and reality, of ancient and futuristic, of virtual, superficial, and material-wait until you see The Luxor" [Anderson and Chase, 1997]. The Luxor depicts a giant Sphinx of Giza, the avenue of the Sphinxes, an obelisk, and the Keops Pyramid in black glass. The Pharaoh's Pavilion, located one level above the casino, is the gateway to the world's largest atrium, displaying a world all its own within the pyramid, a pastiche of past and present, West and Easter civilizations. The Luxor also features IMAX movies and ride films with ancient Egyptian themes, such as "Mysteries of Egypt" or "In Search for the Obelisk." In addition, there is a virtual-reality Roller Coaster that ride people through the movie "The Greatest Pharaohs."
"Luxor Las Vegas has once again opened the doors to what has been called the greatest archaeological find in the history of the world, an authentic reproduction of King Tutankhamun's tomb. The measurements of each of the rooms are exact. The treasures therein were reproduced by artisans using the same gold leaf and linens, precious pigments, tools and original 3,300-year-old methods, and each is meticulously positioned according to the records maintained by the Carter expedition [...] The exhibit houses hundreds of reproductions, including the world-famous guardian statues, King Tutankhamun's sarcophagus, and an array of statues, vases, beds, baskets and pottery" [luxor.com, 2001; my emphasis]

Paris Las Vegas

Park Place Entertainment Corp.'s luxurious new $785 million, 3,220-room Paris Las Vegas resort and casino, opened on September 1, 1999. It is envisioned to immerse visitors in a "complete Parisian experience," bringing the excitement and 'savoir-faire' of Paris to the entertainment capital of the world. "From the Arc de Triomphe to the Louvre to the elegant decor and world-class cuisine, no stone is left unturned, no detail spared" in the attempt to create French's reputable 'joie de vivre.' In addition, Le Boulevard beckons shoppers with European-style boutiques. These efforts at theming Paris Las Vegas, however, are not only made to entice gamblers and shoppers, for the industry of "fast weddings" is also a competitive big business in Las Vegas. Thus, competing with the mystery of Luxor (at The Luxor), the urban vibrancy of New York (at the NY-NY), or the old charm of Venice (at The Venetian), "Paris Las Vegas adds French flair for romance to the traditional honeymoon in Vegas."

Reinventing the 'real', the advertisement of the Paris Las Vegas features "authenticity" as the resort's hallmark. Its advertisement claims that 'authenticity' is evident from the very first glimpse of Paris Las Vegas, with its Eiffel Tower soaring 50 stories into the sky. The gaming tables and slot machines of the casino are set among three of the Tower's enormous legs, and amid winding cobblestone pathways, French wrought iron street lamps, period architecture, and the River Seine. Again, a 40-foot ceiling painted to mirror the Parisian sky at twilight completes the atmosphere of the Parisian street scenes surrounding the casino.

Aladdin Resort & Casino

After 33 years of operation, the legendary Aladdin casino was imploded on April 27, 1998. In its place, the $1.3-billion brand-new hotel complex Aladdin Resort & Casino opened in mid-August, 2000: "the first resort of the new millennium and the future of Las Vegas entertainment" [www.aladdincasino.com, 2001]. Las Vegas' newest resort features an exotic theme based on the legendary 1,001 Arabian Nights, and includes more restaurants, shops, entertainment and casino options than any other destination in Las Vegas. Aladdin Gaming, LLC. is the Las Vegas based developer of the new Aladdin Resort & Casino complex, and TrizecHahn Development Corporation, is the developer of Desert Passage, the resort's expansive shopping, entertainment and dining destination. With extensive entertainment and gaming offerings, the 34-acre complex site includes a new 2,600-room hotel; a 100,000-square-foot casino; the completely remodeled 7,000-seat Theatre for the Performing Arts; The London Club at Aladdin, a 35,000-square-foot European-style luxury casino, and extensive meeting space.
"Luxor Las Vegas has once again opened the doors to what has been called the greatest archaeological find in the history of the world, an authentic reproduction of King Tutankhamun's tomb. The measurements of each of the rooms are exact. The treasures therein were reproduced by artisans using the same gold leaf and linens, precious pigments, tools and original 3,300-year-old methods, and each is meticulously positioned according to the records maintained by the Carter expedition [...] The exhibit houses hundreds of reproductions, including the world-famous guardian statues, King Tutankhamun's sarcophagus, and an array of statues, vases, beds, baskets and pottery" [luxor.com, 2001; my emphasis].

Paris Las Vegas

Park Place Entertainment Corp.'s luxurious new $785 million, 3,220-room Paris Las Vegas resort and casino, opened on September 1, 1999. It is envisioned to immerse visitors in a "complete Parisian experience," bringing the excitement and 'savoir-faire' of Paris to the entertainment capital of the world: "From the Arc de Triomphe to the Louvre to the elegant decor and world-class cuisine, no stone is left unturned, no detail spared" in the attempt to create French's reputable 'joie de vivre.' In addition, Le Boulevard beckons shoppers with European-style boutiques. These efforts at theming Paris Las Vegas, however, are not only made to entice gamblers and shoppers, for the industry of "fast weddings" is also a competitive big business in Las Vegas. Thus, competing with the mystery of Luxor (at The Luxor), the urban vibrancy of New York (at the NY-NY), or the old charm of Venice (at The Venetian), "Paris Las Vegas adds French flair for romance to the traditional honeymoon in Vegas."

Reinventing the 'real', the advertisement of the Paris Las Vegas features "authenticity" as the resort's hallmark. Its advertisement claims that 'authenticity' is evident from the very first glimpse of Paris Las Vegas, with its Eiffel Tower soaring 50 stories into the sky. The gaming tables and slot machines of the casino are set among three of the Tower's enormous legs, and amid winding cobblestone pathways, French wrought iron street lamps, period architecture, and the River Seine. Again, a 40-foot ceiling painted to mirror the Parisian sky at twilight completes the atmosphere of the Parisian street scenes surrounding the casino.

Aladdin Resort & Casino

After 33 years of operation, the legendary Aladdin casino was imploded on April 27, 1998. In its place, the $1.3-billion brand-new hotel complex Aladdin Resort & Casino opened in mid-August, 2000: "the first resort of the new millennium and the future of Las Vegas entertainment" [www.aladdincasino.com, 2001]. Las Vegas' newest resort features an exotic theme based on the legendary 1,001 Arabian Nights, and includes more restaurants, shops, entertainment and casino options than any other destination in Las Vegas. Aladdin Gaming, LLC. is the Las Vegas based developer of the new Aladdin Resort & Casino complex, and TrizettoHahn Development Corporation, is the developer of Desert Passage, the resort's expansive shopping, entertainment and dining destination. With extensive entertainment and gaming offerings, the 34-acre complex site includes a new 2,600-room hotel; a 100,000-square-foot casino; the completely remodeled 7,000-seat Theatre for the Performing Arts, The London Club at Aladdin, a 35,000-square-foot European-style luxury casino, and extensive meeting space.
Interestingly enough, the Aladdin Resort signals the end of an architectural layout dogma in Las Vegas. Whereas in other hotels of The Strip, guest and visitors are forced to pass through the casino floor in their way to their rooms or any other hotel destination, the Aladdin features a unique stacked layout allowing hotel guests to access their rooms, the pool, and the health spa without walking through the casino or other public areas. Such is the confidence of the designers and developers in the profitability of the multifaceted attractions of the hotel, that the rest of the amenities are not conceived as accessories to the casino, but as complements to it. Just as all the other Las Vegas' themed hotels, Aladdin features its share of grand hyperkitsch. There is, for instance, a towering 50-foot golden lamp in the center of the casino floor, a striking tribute to the tale of Aladdin; a dramatic sculpture of giant, winged horses at the entrance to the sports book facility; and a constantly changing wall of light, representing flowers blooming in an enchanted garden, that fills the room with brilliant color.

All this detailing at the Aladdin, however, pales when compared to Desert Passage's hyperkitsch. Truly unprecedentedly, in the wondrous world of fantasy at Desert Passage, hyperkitsch peaks its hallucinatory potential. Guests find a spatially sweeping experience at Desert Passage, the most comprehensive, 500,000-square-foot entertainment and shopping adventure in Las Vegas. The environment at Desert Passage transports visitors to a recreated geography of exotic, ancient trade routes stretching from the coast of Spain across Northern Africa onto the Arabian Sea. 130 stores and 14 restaurants are arranged into a series of merchandising districts which blend architectural styles from the deserts of Morocco to the farthest regions of India. "Along the way, you will be able to browse intriguing marketplaces like the Lost City, which is tucked into a towering mountainside, or enjoy street performances in lively gathering places like the North African Harbor" [desertpassage.com, 2001]. Desert Passage has an outdoor-like, Oriental-Village-like design, with multiple entrances-such as the India and Morocco Gates-levels, and overlooks. It also features a dramatic, four-story ceiling-the highest in Las Vegas-creating the mysterious atmosphere of an Arabian night. Lee Wageman, president and chief executive officer of TrizecHahn Development Corp., said: "We've created an adventure so complete, guests will feel they are traveling along the streets of the great market cities of Tangier, Fez, and Marrakech."

TrizecHahn Development Corp. has followed a clear, single goal-oriented market strategy. For them, Desert Passage is "the only destination on the south end of the Strip which satisfies the longing for tourists' number one preferred activity... shopping." To be sure, in their creation of this consumer haven-or heaven-they have paid due homage to "authenticity." TrizecHahn has worked directly with the Moroccan government "to create a comprehensive presentation of entertainment elements which thoroughly articulate the customs of desert lands." Here, I allow myself to cite extensively from Desert Passage advertisement [desertpassage.com, 2001], in an attempt to convey through content-analysis the unprecedented, mind-blowing extent to which interior architecture and technology are used to create a sense of pleasurable, exotic places and times and, henceforth, catalyze consumerism. What follows is a singular example of hyperkitsch rhetorics that work together with the hyperkitsch physical environment at Desert Passage to create special, alluring time/place settings aimed at promoting the image and profitability of famed stores-which, by the way, are not from the geographies depicted. In addition to the time and place-related physical and discursive metaphors, note how the whole experience of visiting Desert Passage is depicted as an adventurous journey. An adventure, however, without the unknown-risks, dangers, surprises.

"Four unique merchandising and design zones inspired by ancient desert trade routes from Morocco across North Africa provide exceptional, authentic environments for retailers, specialty stores, culinary destinations and a wide variety of exotic merchants. Desert Passage will transport guests to the world's most exotic marketplaces. The exotic and mysterious lands that span the deserts from Morocco through Africa and onto the Arabian Sea and India have long been the fascination of adventurers, and the focus of tales still as much alive and wondrous today as in ancient times. The romantic Spice Routes; the striking diversity of the desert landscape; its peoples, its colors, geometry, and symbols remain vivid influences in modern culture, inspiring the fashions we wear and the stories recreated in literature and on the silver screen.

The journey begins just off the Strip through the Morocco Gate, a grand portal rising 90' above the Strip, which beckons travelers [...]. The visitor is immediately immersed into a vividly authentic street scene brought to life with aged Moroccan antiquities and artifacts dotting the pathways, tiled patterns, Moorish architecture and ancient
buildings etched with the patina and character of a thousand years. If the beauty is found in the details, the grandeur is found in the architectural scale. Although completely enclosed and sheltered from the elements, Desert Passage conveys a remarkable sense of openness and light, creating the sensation of travel through such great market cities as Tangier, Fez, and Marrakech. Far from being all desert, these colorful cities exude a spectacular beauty ubiquitous in the repetitive arches, the mosaic tiles, the straw-permeated stuccos, patterned metalwork and fountain courtyards.

The guiding principle throughout the adventure is to enable travelers to not only observe, but also to hear, taste, touch and even smell the experience. Nowhere within Desert Passage is the engaging of the senses more apparent than in the next Encounter, the Fragrance Market. Here, the subtle rich aromas of essential oils and fragrances surround travelers in a collection of intriguing and intoxicating health and beauty products [...]. Traveling on through a desert fortress and its Treasure House, visitors are tempted with a vast array of treasures and specialties [...] Emerging, the drama is magnified by the traveler’s first glimpse of the majestic Lost City; the grand public square nestled among soaring buildings, tall towers, domes and balconies that sit at the base of a towering 85° mountainside. From balconies carved into the cliffs, onlookers survey the bustling activity of this lively marketplace filled with a public fountain and purveyors of food and fancy. Renowned retailers [...] and acclaimed restaurants [...] serve travelers under the canopy of a sunny desert sky which transitions to a breathtaking sunset and twinkling stars during the evening hours.

In the foothills of the Lost City, the dramatic Sultan’s Palace towers over the courtyard below, its golden dome glistening in the sunlight. [...] In the distance, sounds of the bustling Merchants Harbor draw travelers to a breathtaking North African harbor front and a remarkable discovery, the hull of a 155’ steam ship which is moored into port. Sounds of footsteps along the wooden gangway echo through the streets as longshoremen scramble to unload new merchandise for trading. Scattered clouds drift across the sky as a light breeze tempers the summer heat. The sea gently laps against the wharf as a passing seagull cries overhead. The breeze builds, a buoy clangs and a far off thunder rumbles. Soon, the storm arrives in port and a gentle rain begins to fall, but not for long. Soon, the skies clear and the Merchants Harbor is once again a bustling with all the eclectic energy of true ports of call where hip fashion and resortwear boutiques [...] are bursting with styles from New York, LA, Great Britain and Paris.

For those travelers in search of designer fashion, the preferred destination is the exquisitely proportioned Hall of Lamps. Repetitive arches patterned in the Alhambra’s distinctively colored striping frame the walk [...]. The adventure permeates every detail as travelers are enveloped in cityscapes filled with lush marketplaces where trinkets are presented streetside, musicians, artisans and acrobats punctuate the landscape, and pedicabs gracefully transport travelers from one venue to another. No matter where the journey leads, an underlying warmth and typical hospitality of always wanting to please follow travelers from one moment to the next” [desertpassage.com, 2001; my emphasis].

Freemont Street Experience

As The Strip was gaining in profitability, Freemont Street and the surrounding area in Downtown Las Vegas suffered decline and urban degeneration. It should be noticed that the hotels casinos in The Strip are owned by big corporations, and are located in the county. Therefore, they do not pay taxes to the city of Las Vegas, producing only indirect contributions to the municipal economy. Slowly loosing its customer base to The Strip, by the early 1990s Freemont Street had become a forgotten, crime-ridden neighborhood. Finally, a consortium of casino operators formed a public/private partnership for a downtown revitalization effort, and agreed on a project to roof over Freemont Street, "enshrining the casinos and transforming the area into a giant, controlled, pedestrianised urban entertainment experience" [Anderton and Chase, 1997].

Hotel casinos in The Strip are not the only ones that are taking advantage of the night-being it real or hyperreal-as instrument of spectacle. The Freemont Street Experience is a 90-foot high framed vault covering 4 blocks, where a spectacular lighting Sky Parade set off by the dark sky at night is performed. It has successfully transformed these blocks into a giant foyer for the Freemont Street casinos. "The irony of the Freemont Street"-say Anderton and Chase-“is that it had to be killed in order to be saved. The Freemont Street Experience represents the adaptation of a suburban model-the sanitised shopping mall-to an urban situation” [1997].
Learning from Las Vegas' hyperkitsch

The suspension of real time and space in these resort casino complexes in Las Vegas is aimed at both facilitating the deceiving perception of false, constructed 'natures,' and producing ideal sites for pleasure and consumption. The move to facilitate the perception of constructed 'natures' is a direct response to the current social crisis of urban identity formation for both the human subject and the public sphere. For many of Las Vegas' tourists who visit the hyperkitschy setups of the cities represented in The Strip rather than those real cities themselves, these representations become the visitors' 'real' mental image of those cities. These urban images have been conveniently located and hygienically packaged, detached from the troublesome aspects of real urban life – congestion, crime, pollution, poverty, etc. Similarly, the iconic collages of world-class cities in Las Vegas have been comfortably detached from the somewhat distant and often culturally foreign settings they represent, to be clustered around an accessible, familiar American strip [Irazábal, 1998]. In these ascetic Las Vegas' landscapes, people are driven to suspend their belief, given that space, time, whether, and even reality are recreated for the sake of entertainment. Here, hedonism and consumerism are constructed as two sides of the same coin, disguisingly provoked by spectacle [Irazábal, 2000].

The examination of recent architecture in Las Vegas Strip proves the fluid boundaries between reality and fantasy, and how they are exploded by the sensibilities aroused by the use of kitsch and hyperreality. Kitsch is the medium used in Las Vegas for the production of hyperreality, i.e., the kitsch buildings in The Strip "simulate to have what they haven't." The kitsch landscape in Las Vegas is configured by the substitution of architectural and urban signs and simulations of the real for the real itself. The fascination of people with hyperkitsch iconography inspired in internationally renown urban cities in Las Vegas results from their alienation from their real cities. This is especially true for American visitors-whom constitute the majority of visitor in Las Vegas-and their disenchantment with the anomic American urban and suburban landscapes they inhabit everyday. In Las Vegas Strip, these visitors can enact their fantasies of inhabiting essentialized urban microcosms of world-class cities, particularly from charming Europe-Paris, Venice, Monte Carlo,...or from the 'exotic' Orient-Luxor or from an idyllic past-Imperial Rome, Medieval England,...which create imaginary landscapes upon where to ease-howeover briefly and superfluously-the emptiness and estrangement derived from conflicted urban identities and poor citizenship. These phenomena evidence the current social crisis of urban identity formation for both the human subject and the public sphere amid the accelerating metamorphoses of our contemporary culture of spectacle, hedonism and consumerism.

Despite the incredible capacity that Las Vegas Strip has shown to reinvent itself every couple of years (with an ever shorter cycle), there are many analysts who believe this hyperkitsch landscape has almost reached its limit. The city may in fact be on the verge of a very crude awakening, if for nothing else, because of natural resources depletion, another major aspect of its excesses: with more than 100,000 hotel rooms and the fastest growing population in the U.S., this city in the middle of a desert adds 6,000 people every month, and has the highest per capita water consumption rate in the world, 375 gallons of water per day [The Associated Press, 2001]. Thus, despite its demonstrated resilience, hyperkitsch may not survive in Las Vegas, as Michael Ventura (author and journalist) predicts: "You have all these classic images from all of Western civilization that kind of come here to die. It is as if they have come here for one last party... Everything begins and ends, and one day the desert will come back [to Las Vegas] and take it over again" [Berman et.al., 1996].
Learning from Las Vegas' hyperkitsch

The suspension of real time and space in these resort casino complexes in Las Vegas is aimed at both facilitating the deceiving perception of false, constructed 'natures,' and producing ideal sites for pleasure and consumption. The move to facilitate the perception of constructed 'natures' is a direct response to the current social crisis of urban identity formation for both the human subject and the public sphere. For many of Las Vegas' tourists who visit the hyperkitschy setups of the cities represented in The Strip rather than those real cities themselves, these representations become the visitors' 'real' mental image of those cities. These urban images have been conveniently located and hygienically packaged, detached from the troublesome aspects of real urban life—congestion, crime, pollution, poverty, etc. Similarly, the iconic collages of world-class cities in Las Vegas have been comfortably detached from the somewhat distant and often culturally foreign settings they represent, to be clustered around an accessible, familiar American strip [Irazábal, 1998]. In these ascetic Las Vegas' landscapes, people are driven to suspend their belief, given that space, time, whether, and even reality are recreated for the sake of entertainment. Here, hedonism and consumerism are constructed as two sides of the same coin, disguisedly provoked by spectacle [Irazábal, 2000].

The examination of recent architecture in Las Vegas Strip proves the fluid boundaries between reality and fantasy, and how they are exploded by the sensibilities aroused by the use of kitsch and hyperreality. Kitsch is the medium used in Las Vegas for the production of hyperreality, i.e., the kitsch buildings in The Strip "simulate to have what they haven't." The kitsch landscape in Las Vegas is configured by the substitution of architectural and urban signs and simulations of the real for the real itself. The fascination of people with hyperkitsch iconography inspired in internationally renown urban cities in Las Vegas results from their alienation from their real cities. This is especially true for American visitors—whom constitute the majority of visitor in Las Vegas—and their disenchantment with the anomic American urban and suburban landscapes they inhabit everyday. In Las Vegas Strip, these visitors can enact their fantasies of inhabiting essentialized urban microcosms of world-class cities, particularly from charming Europe-Paris, Venice, Monte Carlo,—or from the 'exotic' Orient—Luxor—or from an idyllic past—Imperial Rome, Medieval England,—which create imaginary landscapes upon where to ease—however briefly and superficially—the emptiness and estrangement derived from conflicted urban identities and poor citizenship. These phenomena evidence the current social crisis of urban identity formation for both the human subject and the public sphere amidst the accelerating metamorphoses of our contemporary culture of spectacle, hedonism and consumerism.

Despite the incredible capacity that Las Vegas Strip has shown to reinvent itself every couple of years (with an ever shorter cycle), there are many analysts who believe this hyperkitsch landscape has almost reached its limit. The city may in fact be on the verge of a very crude awakening, if for nothing else, because of natural resources depletion, another major aspect of its excesses: with more than 100,000 hotel rooms and the fastest growing population in the U.S., this city in the middle of a desert adds 6,000 people every month, and has the highest per capita water consumption rate in the world, 375 gallons of water per day [The Associated Press, 2001]. Thus, despite its demonstrated resilience, hyperkitsch may not survive in Las Vegas, as Michael Venturi (author and journalist) predicts: "You have all these classic images from all of Western civilization that kind of come here to die. It is as if they have come here for one last party... Everything begins and ends, and one day the desert will come back to Las Vegas and take it over again" [Berman et al., 1996].
Even for a critical visitor to Las Vegas, one is not readily flimflammed by the enchanting hyperrealism of hotel casinos in The Strip, the risk of not grasping the transcendence of this phenomenon is still very strong. Paraphrasing the analysis of Disneyland by Baudrillard, just as prisons exist to mask the fact that society itself is one, Las Vegas Strip is presented to us as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact much of the new American urban landscape is no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal. Yet, for all the negative connotations herein explored, is there a pedagogical, liberating, or redemptive potential in hyperkitsch? The anti-kitsch, anti-hyperreality positions that most literature on the subjects endorse remain to be challenged. I briefly point to three different visions along those lines.

First, hyperkitsch as pedagogical. Dissertating about the potential of kitsch, Abraham Moles wrote: “[T]he passage through kitsch is the normal passage in order to reach the genuine. […] Kitsch is pleasurable to the members of mass society, and through pleasure, it allows them to attain the level of higher exigencies” [Moles, 1971]. Calinescu also succumbs to the enchantment of Moles’ paradox, i.e., that the simplest and most natural way toward ‘good taste’ passes through ‘bad taste’. Extrapolating from this notion, if we acknowledge that hyperkitsch is rapidly becoming to be a standard ‘art’ of our time, then it may very well be the unavoidable starting point of any aesthetic experience. Now, if hyperkitsch thrives on aesthetic-and urban experience-naïveté, it also may offer pedagogical possibilities, including the realization that there is difference between hyperkitsch and other forms of art and (urban) reality.

Second, hyperkitsch as liberating, i.e., as the exercise of plurality and as antagonistic to hegemonies of power and art production. Within the specific realm of architecture, it is only fair to note that kitsch has not always being perceived as retrograde and reactionary. Rather, it found strong advocates among the critics of the universalistic and elitist postures of modern architecture. The greatest vindication of kitsch in architecture is found in the work of Californian architect and architectural theorist Robert Venturi. In his groundbreaking book Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture [1966], Venturi advocated for the creation of architectural language that could be read and interpreted at different levels by different people, appealing to different tastes, and not only to the elite’s. His posture promoted an unprecedented questioning of the hegemonic architectural ideology of modernism. Sending into apoplexy the shaky architectural establishment, in 1972 Venturi published his book Learning from Las Vegas, with Dennis Scott Brown and Stephen Izenour. Certainly, Las Vegas made the best place on Earth to pursue their argument. Their work served to promote a plurality of approaches to architectural form and style. Kitsch was legitimized as an outcome of a populist and pluralist approach to architecture, and many sought it purposefully “as an ‘anti-art’ that aimed to destroy the barrier between high and popular culture in the architectural medium” [Kiliçkiran, 2000].

Thirdy, hyperkitsch as redemptive, i.e., as critical, creative, revisionary practice. Olañuquiaga claims there are possibilities for a sort of progressiveness in kitsch⁶. She calls this particular approach to kitsch production third-degree kitsch. In third-degree kitsch the iconography of first- and second-degree kitsch is coopted and invested with new meanings, generating a hybrid product that blends different cultural symbols in varying degrees of transformation. Intensity is sought through the simulation of a recasting of the lost experience. The recreation of objects as third-degree kitsch invests them with new political meanings, and changes them, again, from references to signs. Third-degree kitsch is a result of a paradox: When third-degree kitsch accentuates the attributes for which kitsch was banned as art in the first place—namely, eclecticism, visual saturation, or figurativeness, for instance—it achieves a unique artistic experience. This paradox—namely, the social production and construction of kitsch as true art—promotes the collapsing of modernity’s basic opposition between art and kitsch, or high and popular art. Within the current crisis of representation, “copy, simulation, and quotation are raised to a new level of interest, representing a different experience of art and creativity. In postmodern culture, artifice, rather than commenting on reality, has become the most immediately accessible reality.” […] [Flake and simulation are no longer distinguishable from quotidian life. The boundaries between reality and representation, themselves artificial, have been temporarily and perhaps permanently suspended” [Olañuquiaga, 1992].

Third-degree kitsch reappropriates traditions from a detached vantage point, cannibalizing on imagery as needed to absorb the icons and traditions and remake their meanings. Yet, the colonization of imagery works in the opposite
direction as well, i.e., it causes 'reverse colonization': "Instead of appropriation annihilating what it absorbs, the absorbed invades the appropriating system and begins to constitute and transform it. Third-degree kitsch iconography can "occupy the appropriator's imagination by providing a simulation of experiences the native culture has become unable to produce." Hence the progressive potential of third-degree kitsch for the destabilizing of traditional hegemonies, forcing negotiations with different cultural types of production and perception previously oppressed. "The ability of cultural imagery to travel and adapt itself to new requirements and desires can not longer be mourned as a loss of cultural specificity in the name of exhausted notions of personal or collective identities. Instead, it must be welcomed as a sign of opening to and enjoyment of all that traditional culture worked so hard at leaving out" [Ohalquiaga, 1992].

Far from being realized in current Las Vegas, only time would tell if the envisioning of these new notions of (hyper)kitsch have only been an exercise of wishful thinking and naive optimism. For the time being, I have my contentions. Regarding the pedagogical potential of hyperkitsch, if it appears as a necessary step on the path toward an ever elusive goal of 'authentic' aesthetic experience, would the viewer come to be receptive to the experiences of coming upon the real cities after seeing architectural icons of New York, Paris, or Venice in Las Vegas? Calinescu seems overly optimistic when he believes in the awaking of the subject, i.e., in the unexpected failure of kitsch, reassuringly showing deceivers who are deceived, and fools who realize their foolishness and become wise: an utopia not yet realized in 2000's Las Vegas.

If from the dawn of postmodern architecture in the 1960s and 1970s Venturi et.al. found kitsch to be produced as an expression of plurality against political and artistic hegemonies, in the 1990s and 2000s the world of architectural production seems to have come full circle. The postmodern architecture of the 1960s and 1970s did indeed show a progressive ability-through the production of kitsch and hyperreality-to contest the hegemony of late capitalism and imperialism-expressed through the universalist and elitist postures of modern architecture. This progressive potential, however, has now been coopted by the new hegemonic economic and cultural systems (such as the multimillion corporations of Las Vegas' hotels), which have found in kitsch and hyperreality production-i.e., postmodern architecture-a superb language and media for the deployment of power.

Lastly, the architecture reviewed here as currently present in Las Vegas Strip erase the difference between reality and representation, only to promote the consumption of commodified urban nostalgia. As such, it is second-degree kitsch or hyperkitsch. For this architecture to become third-degree kitsch, or as I would rather put it, post-hyperkitsch, it would have to transit back the way from exchange to use value, from referent to sign, ... and in the process be invested by new, plural, syncretistic, and changing meanings acquired at several levels-personal, social, cultural, and political. At present, however, the production of hyperkitsch in Las Vegas is blatantly hegemonic, and there is no sign of this condition changing in the foreseeable future.

How should we proceed from here, then? I suggest that future critical studies turn from an interest on kitsch as object and hyperreality as technique of re-presentation to the investigation of the production and reproduction of the "hyperkitsch-human" as subject, i.e., the numb consumer of hyperkitsch. Truly enough, the hyperkitsch-human is immersed in an ideology of escapism, subjugated to the hallucinatory effects of the mystification of reality, incapable of either facing the challenges and responsibilities involved in a real urban experience; or, worst yet, incapable of finding a real urban experience in the midst of a hyperreal world. We should not, however, yield to the thought of the hyperkitsch-human as helpless or hopeless subject. Rather, we should reenact the wildest utopian dream of Adorno, uttered in 1947: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. [...] Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light" [Adorno, 1947]. It might not be long before we are apt to discover hyperkitsch falling into its own traps, paradoxically revealing both its own distortions and its latent potentialities for new syncretistic art and reality forms. We may then, after all, become post-hyperkitsch subjects.

fotografias: Dinah Bromberg
REFERENCES

- Semiotext(e).
- Webster's Dictionary.

Web pages consulted

<www.nynyhotelscasino.com>  <www.luxor.com>  
<www.caesars.com>  <www.aladdincasino.com>
<www.paris-lv.com>  <www.venetian.com>  
<www.aladdincasino.com>  <www.desertpassage.com>

NOTAS

1. Paper presented at "Night and the City" Conference, March 16-18, 2001. McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. I thank Professor Eduardo Subirats, PhD, in Philosophy who has written extensively about postmodern culture as spectacle, for his comments on some ideas presented here.
2. I thank my late friend Tamra Slusow, Ph.D. Candidate in Comparative Literature, who suggested the term to me in our conversation on January 18, 2001.
3. By the way, The Mirage can be considered the ultimate metaphor of Las Vegas: an artificial, impossible mirage in the Mothef Desert!
4. For a detailed discussion of nostalgic vs. melancholic kitsch, refer to Olalquiaga [1998]  
5. In the citation, I highlighted in italics words such as journey, traveler, traveling, transport, adventure, and adventurer. I also made italics the descriptions referred to the created time and weather in Desert Passage's different districts. Although I suppressed all the names of the stores from the narrative (supplemented by this sign: [ ]), I still feel the rhetoric strongly conveys the manipulation of three image-making dimensions: time, place, and adventure, in support of consumption.
6. Much of Olalquiaga's work on kitsch has been influenced by Walter Benjamin. It is significant to note that Benjamin considers kitsch to be more accurate that immediate perception, for immediacy, he claims, only allows a notion of reality. Hence, a true apprehension of things is only possible in the distance left by the loss of this immediacy [Benjamin, 1970]. For Olalquiaga, each degree of kitsch has a different way of satisfying a desire for intensity. First-degree kitsch maintains a hierarchical distinction between reality and representation, while helping to familiarize the intelligible (religious beliefs, for instance). It uses images that are part of a readily available cultural heritage. First-degree kitsch strives to satisfy the desire for intensity by the collection and possession of objects infused with use value. In second-degree kitsch the difference between reality and representation collapses, and representation becomes the referent, i.e., the real. Second-degree kitsch displaces use by exchange value, and satisfies a desire for intensity by the consumption of commodified nostalgia. This is the hyperkitsch that I claim exists in the hotel casinos of Las Vegas Strip.