

KITSCH IS DEAD, LONG LIVE KITSCH: THE PRODUCTION OF *HYPERKITSCH* IN LAS VEGAS

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This study investigates the production of hyperreality and kitsch in the latest generation of hotel-casino developments in Las Vegas. In these environments, visual imagery is manipulated for the creation of spectacle and a sense of alienation from time and reality. This suspension of real time and space is aimed at both facilitating the production of a simulated environment as “natural” and producing ideal sites for pleasure and consumption. Building upon the concepts of hyperreality and kitsch, this study proposes the framework of hyperkitsch to understand Las Vegas’s contribution to contemporary urbanization. Through four case studies, this paper suggests that the iconographies of hyperkitsch allow visitors to enact fantasy lives that ease the estrangement that is the result of conflicted urban identities and impoverished citizenship in today’s alienating cities. The first two are Rome and New York at Caesar’s Palace and the New York-New York Hotel/Casinos respectively, which established the new prototype of the hotel-casino complex. The latter two case studies are the urban microcosms of the Venetian and Aladdin, which among the newer hotels feature the perfected “naturalized” cityscape ever more prominently. Breaking ranks with popular dismissive critiques of the Las Vegas prototype, this study argues that if hyperkitsch is here to stay, we need to explore its pedagogical, liberating, and redemptive potential. At a time when meaningful urban citizenship struggles to find footing in a culture increasingly defined by spectacle, hedonism, and consumerism, the hope for this study is to suggest a way out of the impasse imposed by the crises of social urban identity formation.

INTRODUCTION

Almost by accident, Las Vegas has become the place where the twenty-first century begins, a center of the postindustrial world. It has become the first spectacle of the postmodern world. In this transformation, the old pariah has become a paradigm, the colony of everywhere, the colonizer of its former masters.

(Rothman, 2002:xxvi)

Las Vegas continues to fascinate us. As it adds more hotels to its already impressive roster, the city also continues depositing additional layers of hyperreality and kitsch on its already saturated fabric. For the optimist, the resultant iconographies, visual and otherwise, are the building blocks for a spectacle of alternative times and realities. Alternatively, the pessimist might be wary of the resultant alienation from time and space. The protagonist, however, is content to employ this strategically manipulated suspension of reality to facilitate the reception of constructed “natures” as ideal sites for pleasure and consumption.

What is being proposed is an analysis of Las Vegas’s development prototype that brings together the theoretical lenses of hyperreality and kitsch in what this paper shall term *hyperkitsch*.¹ It is suggested that people’s fascination with the urban iconography of *hyperkitsch* stems in part from their alienation from their real cities. As these four case studies explore,² the simulated urban landscapes of the Las Vegas strip are platforms where visitors can suspend the alienation and estrangement of the contemporary city. In the city as fantasy, the pathologies of conflictual urban identities and impoverished citizenship are swept aside, albeit temporarily. The first two studies, the recreation of Rome at Caesar’s Palace and New York in the New York-New York Hotel/Casino, are trailblazers of the now-emulated hotel-casino complex. The latter two studies, the Venetian and Aladdin, are among the newer hotels that feature ever more perfected versions of the “natural” cityscape as an urban microcosm.

The paper first discusses the concepts of hyperreality, kitsch, and *hyperkitsch*. The following section discusses how these concepts apply to selected cases of hotel-casinos in Las Vegas. The final section presents ideas about the pedagogical, liberating, or redemptive potential of *hyperkitsch* and suggests directions for further research. The study aims to be a contribution towards understanding 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 into spectacle, hedonism, and consumerism.

On Hyperreality

We are in the midst of 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, 1986:14). 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, this concept is used to substantiate the claim that in Las Vegas, manipulations of well-known urban icons are exacerbated to the maximum limit, producing a “hyperreal” environment that transcends and replaces the original sources of inspiration in popular consciousness.

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, 1983b:1). Simulation “has no original or referent, for the model replaces the real” (Ellin, 1996:39). These simulated environments become “realer-than-real, a real retouched and refurbished” (Best and Kellner, 1991:119). 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 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 (feigning not to have what one has) to simulation (feigning to have what one has not). In the process, all referents are purged and signs of the real are substituted 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).

While Baudrillard's notions may be (and have been) criticized in a number of ways, they undeniably help to capture a significant aspect of the commodified and mediated nature of our contemporary world in general, and of Las Vegas in particular. Some scholars, however, 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 (1996) addresses the expanding sphere of hyperreality in the urban domain 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 proposes, Boyer prompts us to consider that these fears may be "yet another fiction" (1996:244).

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" (2000:324). In effect, for Eduardo Subirats, the "iconological landfill" of the Las Vegas Strip manifests "the principle of tolerance of a culture that pretends to be democratic, but that only admits the dissidence of signs previously desemantized" (2001).

Finally, some of the scholars who have engaged the study of urban hyperreality are more up front regarding their perceived opportunities for progressive politics, and some are profoundly critical of Baudrillard's views. For instance, Olalquiaga depicts a more urban, spatial, and political understanding of hyperreality than Baudrillard's. She argues that "[d]espite 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" (1992:xv). However, for many people that visit Las Vegas's Strip hotels, the hyperreal environments that they become familiar with constitute the lens through which they reinterpret the originals (Subirats, 2001).

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. 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" (1989:124). Ironically born in the middle of one of the most inclement deserts in the world, the Mohave Desert, the Las Vegas Strip is a perfect illustration of a magical space that 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 is always contested and an ever more elusive hyperreal landscape is constantly recreated.

Evidently, the origin of the contemporary theme park lies in Disneyland (Gottdiener, 1995). But there are many traits that make the Las Vegas Strip different from its predecessor. People pay an entrance fee to partake in this park, created in 1954, so they know they are getting into a make-believe environment

where they can engage in rides and attractions in several different themed worlds (e.g., Adventureland). In the Strip, however, the theming strategies are taken to greater heights (Gottdiener, 2001; Gottdiener, *et al.*, 1999). Rather than having outdoor, scattered attractions loosely grouped under a certain theme as in Disneyland, in Las Vegas the theming of the newest hotel-casinos is fully immersive, with a city-like atmosphere reproduced in the interior of the complexes. The lack of an entrance fee to these complexes enhances the deceptive perception that the world of fantasy, luxury, and wealth that they offer is readily accessible to everybody. The lack of an entrance fee also makes sure there are the fewest possible hindrances to people spending where it matters, *inside* the casino. In Disneyland, the attractions recreate characters and tales of fantasy.³ In the Strip, the hotel-casinos recreate real cities. In Disneyland, the park has opening and closing times. In the Strip, the opportunity to engage in gambling and entertainment activities is virtually never-ending. Disneyland rules and attractions highlight its family values. In Las Vegas, transgression is indulged with the city motto “what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.”

This hyperreal landscape of hotel-casinos in Las Vegas has the explicit intent of creating a governmentality that regulates consumers and puts their behavior at the service of the oligopoly of tourism and gambling industries in Las Vegas. To what extent is this strategy successful? In the midst of a hyperreal environment, where reality is no longer what it used to be, what grounds remain for politics that redeem alternative or complementary subjectivities to that of consumers, hedonists, and disaffected denizens?

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. To call something kitsch is usually a way of rejecting it as distasteful, repugnant, or disgusting. A socio-historical approach views kitsch as typically modern and, as such, closely linked to cultural industrialization, commodification, and hedonism. An aesthetic approach portrays kitsch as false art, the production of various forms of “aesthetic lies.” Broch claimed that by aestheticizing reality, kitsch defines its goal within a closed system — the finite universe of what is already known (1969). In Eco’s terms (1989:203), a kitsch product assumes the “garb of an aesthetic experience.” Yet, it manifests itself as something that does not seem to fit in its surroundings.

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. The kitsch designer mimics symbols that have proved successful and have been widely accepted or even turned into stereotypes. Kitsch’s stylistic eclecticism thus co-opts its artistic “challengers” using stereotypes for its aesthetically conformist purposes. Kitsch has to do with the modern illusion that beauty may be bought and sold. 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.

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 a pleasurable escape from the banality of work and boredom of leisure, i.e., from the dullness of modern quotidian life. Kitsch became an aesthetic refuge for people to cope with the uncertainties brought about by modernity. “Kitsch uses *avant-garde* procedures for purposes of ‘aesthetic advertising’” (Calinescu, 1977:231). Thus, things associated with “high culture” can be reproduced for immediate consumption — turned into a commodity. Kitsch, therefore, is a salient manifestation of the aesthetics and ethics of consumerism (*ibid.*). Architects and interior, set, and show designers in Las Vegas turn into skillful propagandists trying to “sell” accepted ideological commonplaces through historically specific architecture and performances. The cultural content of the buildings and shows become kitsch when they assume a false identity.

Recent cultural studies on kitsch, however, reclaim the notion 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" (Olalquiaga, 1998:174). The appeal of kitsch "prods us beyond simple, nostalgic yearnings and sentimentality to irrational acceptance of the impossible or the incongruous" (Brown, 1987:15).

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, kitsch has become increasingly associated with the works of the tourist industry. The Yugoslavian philosopher Gillo Dorfles stated it blatantly: "tourism is the home of kitsch" (1969:87). For its part, not only does kitsch architecture in Las Vegas suggest richness and superfluity, but also is deceptively inexpensive to consume. Hotel prices are relatively cheap for the high standard of services they offer. However, the average visitor spends, or wastes, a lot more money than she anticipated in her stay, participating in gambling and entertaining activities. This is precisely the goal of investors in hotel-casinos in Las Vegas.

The conditions of immersion in total, kitschified environments in Las Vegas may have some significant implications for the transformations of late modern subjectivities. According to Calinescu (1987/1996), the tendency to hedonistic consumption and its effects of alienation creates the "kitsch-man." A *kitsch-(hu)man* would be one who experiences as kitsch even non-kitsch works or situations, involuntarily making a parody of aesthetic response. With her hedonistic perspectives of what is artistic or beautiful, the *kitsch-human* wants to fill her spare time with maximum excitement in exchange for minimum effort. With undeveloped critical sense, the *kitsch-human* shows mental passivity and laziness. Subirats takes this one step further, claiming that the Las Vegas gambler can become a "terminal subject in whom ethical and aesthetical conflicts have been overcome." This new subjectivity "is strictly constructed around an ultimate limit: her monetary credit" (2001).

On Hyperkitsch

This study argues 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 of "nature" and "traditions," first experienced amidst the industrial revolution, have grown to unprecedented levels. Olalquiaga claims that what was quickly disappearing then "was idealized as containing an essence whose appeal increased in direct relation to its experiential decrease" (1998:118). Today, the deterioration of the quality of urban environments and urban life in American cities in the last half century has triggered a longing for and glorification of what has been lost. This paper contends that people's fascination with *hyperkitsch* iconography that connects to the urban world, as represented in large scale in the hotel-casinos of the Strip, results in part from their alienation from their real cities. Identifying this profitable market demand, building sciences and tourist and entertainment industries combined to virtually recreate and "perfect" the invented cities' role as bearers of individual and social urban identities. When hotel-casinos in Las Vegas simulate cities, they provide a uniquely effective multimedia environment for the recreation of evanescent fantasies and experiential or vicarious recollections of particular times and spaces. The more these very notions of time and space become ambiguous and fragmented in the urbanized world in a global era, the greater the urge to crystallize idealized notions of urban time and "placeness." The market exchange of city simulacra in Las Vegas sets up a seemingly self-perpetuating mechanism:

[T]he 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, 1998:125)

When kitsch substitutes real things by commodified loss, hyperreality is created. In postmodern cultural sensibility, kitsch thus turns out 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 allegorical values. This move does not get rid of reality. Rather, it promotes a "broadening of the notion of reality, whereby vicariousness is no longer felt as false or secondhand but rather as an autonomous, however incredible, dimension of the real" (Olalquiaga, 1992:42). Moles (1971) names this phenomenon "neokitsch," (Moles, 1971), and Olalquiaga (1992) calls it a "second-grade kitsch" or "kitsch-kitsch." For them, this new dimension of kitsch collapses the difference 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 (*ibid.*). Thus having established the link between kitsch and hyperreality, this paper proposes an even better-tailored, hybrid term for this discussion: "*hyperkitsch*."

In the Las Vegas Strip, historically loaded, yet debased landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower, St. Mark's Square and Campanile, or the Imperial Roman Forum become devoid of their original socio-historical and geocultural meaning and are repackaged for millions of visitors as fashionable urbanesque sites for gambling and consumption. This rupture of historical continuity to commercial doodad equates betting and buying in comfort with the *hyperkitsch* illusion of participating in a historically or contemporary authentic urban experience.⁴

World-Class Cities, Las Vegas Style

For the first half of the twentieth century, there were excessive, dangerous, promiscuous warrens of spaces run by mobs in Las Vegas, where pleasure was seasoned with danger, and where desire and illegality ran fairly free in alleyways, clubs, bars, theaters, music halls, and gambling dens. During those first decades of the 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 through distinct generations of hotel/casino styles in Las Vegas.

In 1969, new regulations allowed corporations to own the casinos, and a handful of risky entrepreneurs aimed to bring legitimacy and radical transformation to the Las Vegas entertainment industry and landscape. Rapidly, Las Vegas was transformed into a purified space for pleasure, inhabited by a well-regulated population. Transgressive pleasure was put into line and offered as a package of commodified contentment. The calculated, rationalized, and repetitive programs for the new multimillion dollar 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, real urban experiences, for each city-themed hotel-casino in Las Vegas is populated, not by the spontaneous movements of urban inhabitants, but by carefully induced movements of tourists and gamblers. The cities thus cartooned become 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 "the city" as a space-and-time atmosphere of multiple and adventurous meanings and (transgressive) opportunities have been co-opted by the masters of place making in Las Vegas to produce contained and controlled spaces where clients can act out their fantasies in a deceptively safe environment.

Throughout the 1990s, the opening of each new hotel in Las Vegas prompted a dramatic increase in room occupancy. The city now has over 100,000 hotel rooms. This trend culminates on the avenue known as the Strip; attracting more than 35 million visitors each year, the Las Vegas Strip is a hyperscaled theme park set to evoke images of idealized world-class cities. On the Strip, mega-graphics, 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 inspired by contemporary world-class cities of other latitudes or historical times.

Let us now turn to the four specific developments at hand. The first two are the *hyperkitsch* simulacra of Rome and New York: Caesar's Palace Hotel/Casino and the New York-New York Hotel/Casino.

This will be followed by a discussion of The Venetian and Aladdin, which, as stated in the introduction, are examples of how essentialized urban microcosms are recreated as “natural” cityscapes.

Caesar's Palace

The first and the oldest casino hotel in Las Vegas that started the trend towards theme architecture and family entertainment is Caesar's Palace. Since its opening in 1966, Caesar's Palace has been one of the very few hotels from the 1960s that 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. Caesar's Palace conveys the imaginary golden era of the Imperial Roman Empire through paraphernalia saturated with clichéd signifiers: Romanesque columns, fountains, statues, etc. It attempts to create a world resplendent in regal pleasures, offering lavish service, accommodations, cuisine, recreational opportunities, and entertainment events. Caesar's 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. (...) 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.

(1998:97-98; author's emphasis)

Olalquiaga claims that nostalgic kitsch sacrifices the potential plurality of meanings. “Nostalgic kitsch is static, it doesn't move, it just oscillates back and forth between the glorified experience and its subject, without any transformation” (1998:122). As nostalgic kitsch, Caesar's 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 Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas has been so commercially successful that siblings have been created in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Lake Tahoe, Nevada, and near Croydon and Bridgeport, Indiana.

In Caesar's 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 Forum Shops at Caesar's, a 200,000 square feet, \$110 million structure (Figure 1). The Forum is a hybrid of shopping mall and entertainment center that started a new trend in Las Vegas: the blurring of night and daytime. 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 at a much faster pace than that of nature, it subverts biological time clocks, catalyzing the anxiety of consumerism. The blurring of nighttime and daytime situates the visitors in a state of subverted temporality, leading some people to lose track of the time spent there, and potentially causing the prolongation of their visit.

In the Forum Shops at Caesar's, the piazzas, statuary, fountains, and façades attempt to simulate the streets of historic Rome (Figure 2). 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 late morning through late evening seven days a week.” Indeed, to the astonishment of observers, the simulacra of statues depicting gods and goddesses surprisingly start moving and talking at certain show times. Those kitschified statues are there to evoke the ones artists from Imperial Rome or from the Italian Baroque or Renaissance made, collapsing historical times and reducing the significance of unique, historically specific artistic creations to a repetitive spectacle of trivial, special effect shows. The theming scheme has proven very popular and has prompted the most recent addition to the Caesar's complex, the Appian Way Shops, an exclusive shopping arcade with a 1:1 replica of Michelangelo's *David*.

New York-New York

Two big corporations (MGM Grand and Primadonna Resorts, Inc.) teamed up to create the New York-New York (NY-NY) Hotel & Casino, a \$350 million, 2,024 room complex in 1996. Hailed as “the greatest city in Las Vegas,” this collage property recreates America's most paradigmatic metropolis.

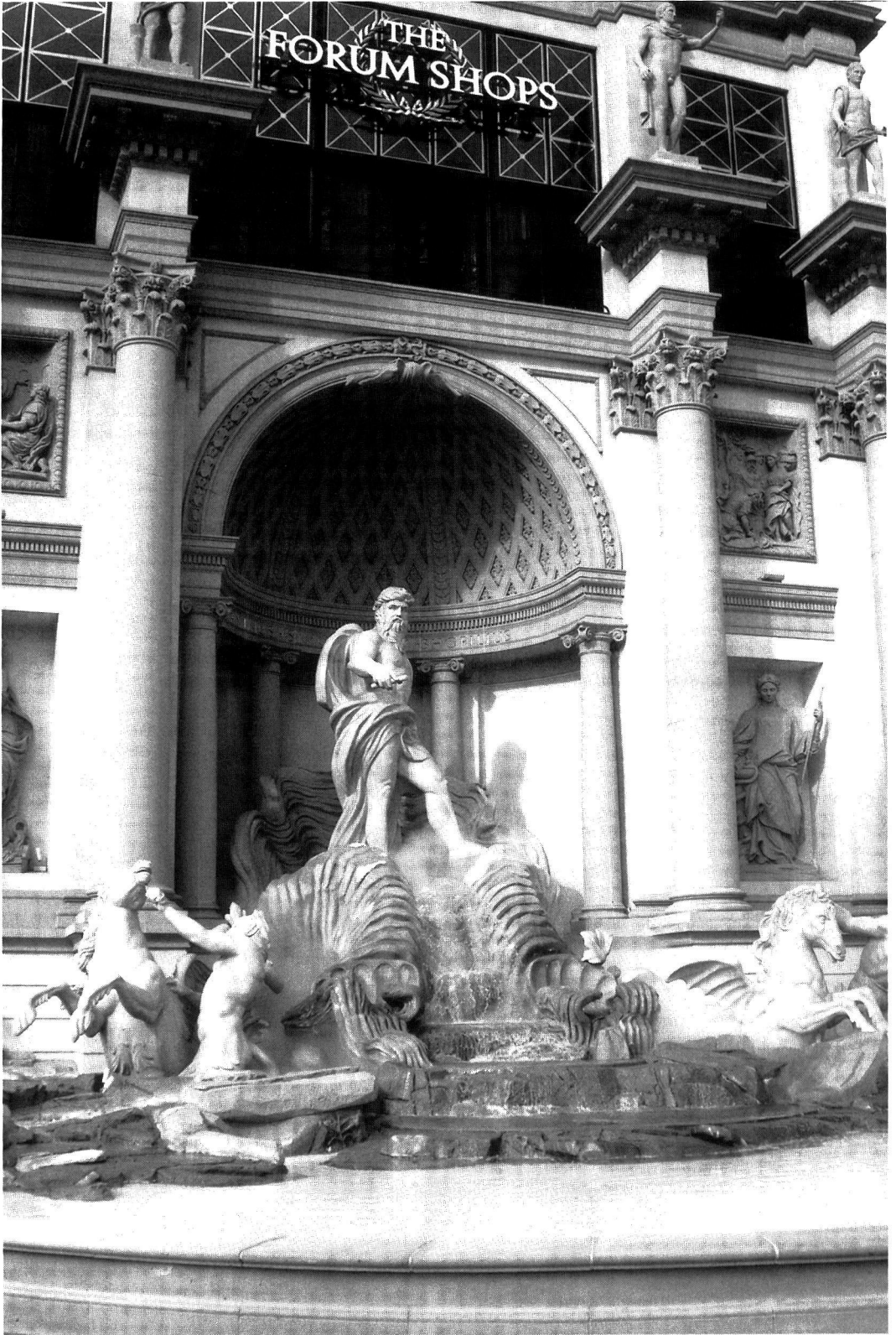


FIGURE 1. The entrance to the Forum Shops at Caesar's Palace. The replica of the Trevi Fountain in Rome provides visibility for the luxurious mall. Photo by Jason Neville.



FIGURE 2. The interior of the Forum Shops at Caesar's Palace is the first environment in Las Vegas to create a constructed "outdoor" space depicting a changing sky. Photo by Jason Neville.

In contrast to the ancient and foreign inspirational theme of the Caesar's Palace, the popular NY-NY offers American tourists a taste, in Las Vegas, of the primal city that creates and projects a powerful, contemporary image of the nation for the rest of the country and the world. Some visitors opt to go to NY-NY rather than to the real New York City and feel satisfied by the experience. It is not that the majority of visitors delusionally think that visiting NY-NY is equivalent to visiting the real New York City. Rather, intuitively or consciously acknowledging the difference, they opt to visit NY-NY rather than the alternative. In these cases, the real city becomes a secondary alternative to the simulacrum.

There are many reasons for that preference.⁵ One significant reason is that in NY-NY visitors enjoy an ambience where "urban experience" has been edited to expunge from it all its rough edges. In selecting NY-NY over New York City, some visitors to the Las Vegas Strip are opting for "freedom from" surprise, risk, unpredictability, over "freedom to" take on the complexity of city life, including the full exercise of citizenship and democracy (Rothman, 2002). These people enjoy having the best pieces of New York City 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 12 New York styled hotel towers, featuring the iconic Chrysler, AT&T, and Empire State buildings (Figure 3).

The connection to the real New York is so vivid for many that an impromptu memorial for the victims of the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks to the World Trade Center towers was created in front of Las Vegas' replica of the Statue of Liberty in the NY-NY, at a corner of the Strip. The spontaneous uproar of emotions expressed in the make-shift memorial was rapidly co-opted by the management of the hotel, transformed into a permanent exhibit of 9/11 memorabilia including mementos of real victims and heroes of the tragedy in New York, and added to the eclectic spectacularization of New York in Las Vegas.

Another area of the NY-NY, the Coney Island Emporium, provides an array of amusing activities, including simulators: futuristic attractions set against the stage-set sights, sounds, and thrills of New York. A roller coaster surrounds all the attractions of the hotel, adding "urban" ambience to the atmosphere. The



FIGURE 3. The facade of the New York-New York packs in 12 New York-styled skyscrapers. Photo by Jason Neville.

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 from all the obvious kitsch and grand hyperreality, three revealing details give a more subtle idea of the dimension of *hyperkitschification* at New York-New York. First is the domestic scaling of urban furniture and façade details. At the indoor Greenwich Village simulation, there are scaled-down buildings, with little windows depicting flowery curtains and semi-open blinds, streetlight posts, and signs. More surprisingly, mailboxes and other street furniture are tagged over with characteristic New Yorker street graffiti, in what constitutes a co-optation of a quintessential language of urban contestation and resistance.

The second detail is 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 suggestive photographs, is yet attired as the most respected woman of American symbolism: Mrs. Liberty. Holding up her fake flame, Monroe's icon suggests 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 quest for the most supreme of values, liberty (Figure 4).

Finally, there is an attempt by the reproduction at different scales to recreate the "essence" of New York, from the skyscrapers crammed on Figures 5A-B at the exterior hotel façade to the nitty-gritty recreation of Greenwich Village in the inside. Yet, this hallucinatory game with scales reaches its ultimate expression in a souvenir-selling cart: within a skyscraper-themed hotel, a souvenir cart designed with motifs of skyscrapers sells skyscraper souvenirs (Figure 6). This chain of simulations signals 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.⁶



FIGURE 4. Marilyn Monroe emulating the Statue of Liberty at the New York-New York. Photo by Ramón Gascue.



FIGURE 5A. Greenwich Village's streets in the interior of the New York-New York. Photo by Ramón Gascue.

Besides the aforementioned recreations of Rome and New York, there are essentialized urban microcosms of Luxor, Paris, Monte Carlo, and other cities in the Las Vegas Strip. Today, The Venetian and Aladdin are among the newest hotels that feature ever more perfect versions of cityscape.

The Venetian

Located at the very center of the Las Vegas Strip on the former site of the legendary Sands Hotel (which was torn down to make room for this new hotel),⁷ The Venetian is a \$2 billion, 3,036 suite luxury resort inspired by the splendor of Italy's so-called most romantic city: Venice (Figure 8). 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(s) 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; author's emphasis). "Built virtually to scale of the original," according to Time Magazine, The Venetian reproduces the legendary city's most storied landmarks and rituals, but they are all put in the service of inducing consumerism:

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. (Venetian.com, 2001; author's emphasis)

The experience of Venice at The Venetian is projected beyond the immediacy of the *hyperkitsch* three-dimensional environment. In effect, 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

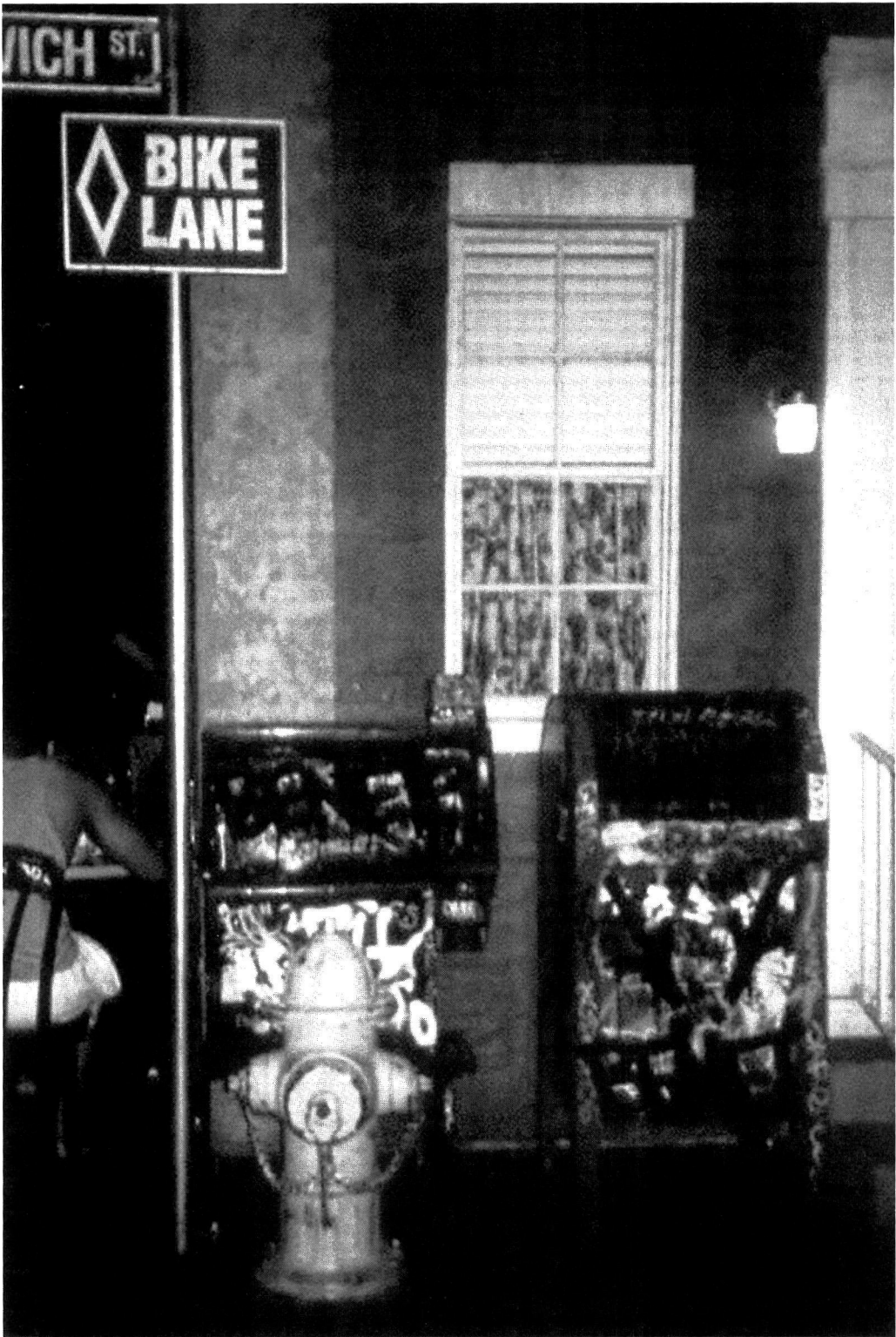


FIGURE 5B. Greenwich Village's streets in the interior of the New York-New York.



FIGURE 6. The embedding of hyperkitsch: in the interior of a skyscraper-themed hotel, a skyscraper-decorated cart selling skyscraper souvenirs.



FIGURE 7. Gondoleers sing Italian songs to tourists under the artificial sky of The Venetian. Photo by Ramón Gascue.



FIGURE 8. Simulated sphinxes and palms decorate the interior of Luxor. Photo: Ramón Gascue.

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 secrets inside a Giant Pyramid. Surprisingly enough, the realm of hyperreality acquires 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 (Figure 9).

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 August 2000: "the first resort of the new millennium and the future of Las Vegas entertainment" (www.aladdincasino.com, 2005). The resort features an exotic theme based on the imagined built environments that form the material basis of the legendary *1,001 Arabian Nights*, and it includes more restaurants, shops, entertainment, and casino options than any other destination in Las Vegas.

Visitors find a spatially sweeping experience at Desert Passage, the most comprehensive, 500,000 square foot entertainment and shopping adventure in Las Vegas. In the wondrous world of fantasy at Desert Passage, *hyperkitsch* peaks its hallucinatory potential. 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. One hundred thirty stores and 14 restaurants are arranged into a series of merchandising districts that 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).

In the advertisement of Desert Passage, *hyperkitsch* marketing rhetoric depicts how interior architecture and technology are used to create a sense of pleasurable, exotic places and times. This rhetoric works 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, the whole experience of visiting Desert Passage is depicted as an adventurous journey, an adventure, however, without risks, dangers, or unscripted surprises. The rhetoric strongly conveys the manipulation of three image-making dimensions: time, place, and adventure, in support of consumption.

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 fables 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.

(Desertpassage.com, 2005)

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 naturalization of constructed urban landscapes and producing ideal sites for pleasure and consumption. For many tourists who visit the *hyperkitschy* setups of the cities represented in the Strip rather than the real cities themselves, these representations become the visitors' most vivid mental images 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. In these aseptic landscapes, people are driven to suspend their belief, given that space, time, weather, 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 the spectacularization of the built environment (Irazábal, 2005). However, it is worth noting that the suspension of disbelief is greatly impacted every time visitors go back onto the Strip to travel from one casino to the next. As hotel-casino owners in the Strip are getting fewer (with some corporations owning more than one) and are making efforts to smoothly link them together (through monorails, people movers, etc.), it is plausible that in the future, the Strip may become "one great *hyperkitsch* blob, where reality never intrudes."⁸

The examination of recent architecture in the Las Vegas Strip proves the fluid boundaries between reality and fantasy and how they are exploited 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 have not. The fascination of people with *hyperkitsch* iconography inspired in internationally renowned urban cities in Las Vegas results in part from their alienation from their real cities. This is especially true for American visitors, who constitute the majority of visitors in Las Vegas, and their disenchantment with the anomic American urban and suburban landscapes they inhabit everyday. In the Las Vegas Strip, these visitors can enact their fantasies of inhabiting essentialized urban microcosms of world-class cities, particularly from charming Europe — Paris (in Paris Las Vegas) (Figure 9), Venice (in The Venetian), and Monte Carlo — or from the "exotic" Orient — Luxor or Northern Africa (in Aladdin) — or from an idyllic past: Imperial Rome (in Caesar's Palace) and Medieval England (in Excalibur), which create imaginary landscapes upon which to ease, however briefly and superfluously, the emptiness and estrangement derived from conflicted urban identities and impoverished citizenship.



FIGURE 9. Several icons of Parisian architecture compose a collage at Paris Las Vegas. Photo by Ramón Gascue.

I refer to impoverished citizenship here as transcending the commonly acknowledged political boundaries of citizenship (i.e., lack of right of suffrage and access to participation, etc.) and encompassing the more broadly defined citizens' "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1968/1996). Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city suggests "a wholly new structure in which inclusion, participation, and rights revolve not around state powers and policies, but around *the production of urban space*" (Purcel, n.d.:3; his emphasis). Specifically, the right to the city

Grants control over the production of urban space principally to those who inhabit the city. Moreover, it reconceives the basic rationale for producing urban space in capitalism such that urban space should be produced to meet the everyday needs of urban inhabitants, rather than to meet the accumulation needs of capital.
(Id., 4)

In the Las Vegas Strip, the *hyperkitschified* construction of urban environs within the hotel casinos becomes a welcome escape for some visitors who have difficulties exercising their "right to the city" in their places of residence. They willingly partake in the illusion of having rights to the city in the controlled, safe, and aesthetized urban recreations of the Strip, even though the spaces are produced for the accumulation of capital. These phenomena suggest 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 the Las Vegas Strip has shown to reinvent itself every couple of years (with an ever shorter time cycle), there are analysts who believe that 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.⁹ Thus, despite its demonstrated resilience, *hyperkitsch* may not survive in Las Vegas, as author and journalist Michael Ventura 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). Here, Baudrillard's conception of the desert as the ultimate symbol of the postmodern condition in America may be forewarning.

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 endorses remain to be challenged. This paper points to three different visions along those lines: *hyperkitsch* as pedagogical, as liberating, and as redemptive. These notions are far from being realized in current Las Vegas. Only time will tell if the envisioning of these new notions of *hyperkitsch* is an exercise in wishful thinking and naïve optimism.

First, *hyperkitsch* as pedagogical: if we acknowledge that *hyperkitsch* is rapidly becoming a standard "art" of our time, then it may very well be that, for many individuals, it functions or can function as the starting point of aesthetic experience. If *hyperkitsch* may function as a stepping stone on the path toward an ever more elusive goal of "authentic" aesthetic experience, then viewers may become receptive to the experiences of coming upon the real cities after seeing architectural and urban design icons of New York, Paris, or Venice in Las Vegas. If so, the appreciation of the *hyperkitschified* cities on the Strip for what they are would prepare people for the real cities or help them reflect on them. It would also expand people's realm of experience, reality, and knowledge. Rather than experiencing and appreciating "either/or" representation of an object (in this case *either* a city *or* its *hyperkitsch* recreation in Las Vegas), individuals can experience and appreciate "both/and," and each one may reveal important points about the other.

Second, *hyperkitsch* as liberating: that is, as an exercise of plurality, antagonistic to hegemonies of power and art production. At the dawn of postmodern architecture in the 1960s and 1970s, Venturi (1966; Venturi and Brown 1972) found kitsch to be produced as an expression of plurality against political and artistic hegemonies. 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 universal and elitist postures of modern architecture. This progressive potential, however, has now been largely co-opted by the new hegemonic economic and cultural systems (such as the multimillion dollar corporations that own Las Vegas' hotels), which have found in kitsch and hyperreality production, i.e., postmodern architecture, a superb language and medium for the deployment of power and governmentalities. While the liberating, or at least subversive, potential of *hyperkitsch* is still realized in other realms of cultural production, such as certain genres of music, painting, sculpture, and performance art, for the time being it seems to have vanished from the Strip. The creative ingenuity of rising entrepreneurs in competition that formed the strip landscape in the 1960s and early 1970s, which Venturi and Brown praised in *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), has given way to an oligopoly of a few moguls that control design variation in the architecture and signage of the Strip with the main purpose of expanding profits. If *hyperkitsch* is not liberating, however, it may turn oppressive. *Hyperkitsch* in Las Vegas may provide entertainment and pleasure to many, but it also both sharpens and disguises distinctions between the haves and have-nots (Rothman, 2002; Rothman and Davis, 2002). In addition, by glorifying consumerism and hedonism, Las Vegas *hyperkitsch* may help subjugate and arrest the development of human subjectivity.

Third, *hyperkitsch* as redemptive: that is, as critical, creative, revisionary practice. The architecture currently present in the Las Vegas Strip erases 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 redemptive, or "*post-hyperkitsch*," it would have to transit back 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. The challenges, however, may happen slowly and modestly, starting with some ideas. For instance, Rothman (2002:xxiii-xxiv) provocatively reports that "locals muse that someday a hotel on the Strip will surely accommodate those who stroll the Strip to marvel at its faux wonders; called 'Las Vegas, Las Vegas,' it will be a cutdown version of the Strip with all its hotels inside a Strip hotel. People will be able to see the Strip — at five-eighths scale — without ever going outside and they won't get sunburned in the process!"

For some, the realization of such hotel design would signal the ultimate triumph of *hyperkitsch*. Others may take it further to suggest "the death of the subject" (Heartfield, 2002), "the end of tradition" (AlSayyad, 2004), or "the end of history" (Fukujama, 1992). However, we could alternatively conceive of the thought of such hotel design as an exercise that has the potential to unravel the critical and creative potential of *hyperkitsch*, in the process accomplishing *post-hyperkitsch* design and moving individuals towards a wider awareness of the potential of human subjectivity and towards realizing that potential.

Meanwhile, interventions in the Strip are not moving away from building mega projects, although the latest trends may signal yet a new cycle with new types of development. In Spring 2005, casino impresario Steve Wynn opened his latest casino project in the Strip, a copper-colored tower named Wynn Las Vegas. Departing from the other Strip hotel-casino type, this one is not themed on a city, and it scales down its gambling facilities in favor of greater and more luxurious diversification of entertainment options. Wynn is also planning to build a huge complex that would entail as many as a dozen resort hotels surrounding a big, artificial lake that would be built behind the Wynn Las Vegas. At the same time, MGM Mirage announced that it was going to build a \$4 billion "city" on the Strip. According to the company, the massive development is the size of New York's SoHo district, Times Square, and Rockefeller Center combined (Steins, 2004). What can we make of these development trends? It is early to tell, but the Strip may start evolving into a mixed-use corridor specializing in entertainment and gambling facilities with a growing residential component, still in the hands of a few big corporations, where *hyperkitsch* may yet be reinvented once more. These new master-planned communities on or near the Strip would follow the example of Disney's town Celebration, i.e., places of carefully crafted Neo-Traditional design and New Urbanism principles, tapping into the recreation

and theming of nostalgia and sense of community for the purpose of real estate success (Frantz and Collins, 1999; Ross, 1999).

How should we proceed from here, then? Within *hyperkitsch* environments geared to exalt and induce consumerism and hedonism, what opportunities remain for a politics that redeems alternative or complementary subjectivities to that of consumers, hedonists, and escapist citizens? To be sure, however grand the attempts of the hotel-casino designers for the creation of hegemonic places, meanings in these environments still are and will continue to be socially constructed (Gottdiener, *et al.*, 1999). Visitors to these environments have different motivations, and more importantly, different reactions and responses to their experiences in these places.¹⁰ Thus, this paper suggests that future critical architectural and urban studies turn from an interest on kitsch as an object of inquiry and hyperreality as a technique of representation to the investigation of the production and reproduction of, as well as resistances to, the “*hyperkitsch*-human” as subject, i.e., the acritical consumer of *hyperkitsch*. Truly enough, a *hyperkitsch*-human would be immersed in an ideology of escapism, subjugated to the hallucinatory effects of the mystification of reality, hardly capable of either facing the challenges and responsibilities involved in a real urban experience, or worse yet, indifferent to finding a *real* urban experience in the midst of a hyperreal world. We cannot, however, yield to the thought of a *hyperkitsch*-human as helpless or hopeless subject. Rather, there is always the potential for all subjects to discover *hyperkitsch* paradoxically revealing both its own distortions and its latent potentialities for new syncretistic forms of art and reality.

In this study’s call to embrace a new *post-hyperkitsch* subject, we need to radically rethink the notion of authenticity that defines our conception of the role of the urban in the formation of subjectivity. Here we might look to the philosophical tradition in the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre for inspiration. We find in their work the contention that authenticity is a way in which the conscious self acts and changes in response to pressures of external forces, where the impetus to action arises from the self and is not externally imposed. More recently, this sentiment was expressed by Charles Taylor, who claims that overcoming the excesses of radical individualism and instrumental reason, a reason that finds the highest good in the economic maximizing of ends, requires ethics of authenticity, a dialogical discovery of the self, consciously controlling the psychological, institutional, and familial pressures to conform (Taylor, 1992). This ethics of authenticity would define a *post-hyperkitsch* subject. From here, an authentic relation between people and place, in which the populace, in Lefebvre’s spirit, claims the right to the city, is the prerequisite to transcend instrumental reason. Such a condition can further act as the basis for an authentic relation between individuals, overcoming radical individualism, and can create places upon which real human communities can be built (Welsh, 1998). As a set of practices, *hyperkitsch* is subject to appropriation. We could explore, through *hyperkitsch*, new pedagogical, liberating, and redemptive modes of engaging and recreating the world. We may then, after all, strive to become *post-hyperkitsch* subjects, expanding our human agency and participating in enriching multicultural and multidimensional subjectivity formation processes.

NOTES

1. I thank my late friend, Tamra Suslow, Ph.D. Candidate in Comparative Literature, who suggested the term to me in our conversation on January 18, 2001.

2. This project is also based on the review of hotel websites and journalistic and scholarly multidisciplinary literature on Las Vegas and the Strip, including studies drawn from the areas of architecture, urban design and planning, history, semiotics, and communications. In addition, I relied on observation, participant observation, and informal interviews of lay and academic visitors of the Las Vegas Strip, gathered in several fieldtrip visits to Las Vegas and also in some Los Angeles venues. Furthermore, this research benefited from feedback received in two international conferences on cities and media and two urban master courses on urban design and planning. The conferences were the “New Cities, New Media,” held at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, January 17-19, 2003; and “Night and the City,” held at McGill University, Montreal, March 16-18, 2001. The courses were part of the Master of Planning Program at the University of Southern California in Spring 2003 and Fall 2004.

3. Aladdin is an intersection of the two styles — a fantasy embraced by both Disney and the Las Vegas Strip.

4. Authenticity is a slippery and contested concept. In this article, it mostly refers to its Webster's Dictionary definition as "genuineness; the quality of being genuine or not corrupted from the original." Thus, authentic urban places and experiences refer to those existing in their original or "real" settings: the cities of New York, Paris, Venice, etc., as opposed to those in Las Vegas' Strip hotels.
5. People opt to go to the NY-NY hotel rather than to New York City because they are looking for the type of entertaining that is concentrated in the Las Vegas Strip rather than the full array of urban experiences available in New York. Another reason is that tourist accommodations and expenses can be cheaper in the NY-NY than in New York. Lastly, many visitors of the NY-NY live in the Southwest region of the U.S. and that makes their travel costs to Las Vegas more accessible than to New York. More research would need to be done to sort out the relative importance of all these reasons.
6. For a detailed discussion of nostalgic vs. melancholic kitsch, refer to Olalquiaga (1998).
7. The Strip is the crux of real estate hotel-casino development in Las Vegas. Therefore, the "100% location" needs to be cyclically recycled, with decadent hotels making room for more fashionable ones. The length of cycles of obsolescence for hotel-casino complexes grows ever shorter, and the standards to make them attractive and profitable grow ever higher, demanding greater spectacularization of their design.
8. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this provoking comment.
9. For instance, 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.
10. This is a fruitful area for further ethnographic research.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their productive suggestions, to Ramón Gascue and Jason Neville for their photos, and to Ramzi Farhat and Surajit Chakravarty for their help with text and image editing.

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Manuscript revisions completed 21 June 2006



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TITLE: Kitsch Is Dead, Long Live Kitsch: The Production of
Hyperkitsch in Las Vegas

SOURCE: J Archit Plann Res 24 no3 Aut 2007

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