

## City of Las Vegas

### *The Grit Beneath the Glitter: Tales from the Real Las Vegas*

Hal K. Rothman and Mike Davis, editors. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002. 388 pages. \$50, \$19.95 (paperback).

### *Neon Metropolis: How Las Vegas Started the Twenty-First Century*

Hal K. Rothman. Routledge, New York, 2002. 352 pages. \$18.95 (paperback).

Deception and self-deception have become second nature in Las Vegas, which is why these books by Hal Rothman and Mike Davis provide much appreciated critical perspective. They allow the readers to engage “the city of desires” in profound and multifaceted ways. While Las Vegas is called “the city of the future” or “the city of the twenty-first century,” the editors and authors of *The Grit Beneath the Glitter* rightfully ask whether Las Vegas would also be “the new American nightmare?” (p. 9).

*The Grit Beneath the Glitter* explores a variety of topics, including political economy, environmental issues of a desert city, the mythology of Las Vegas (particularly as it is depicted in the cinema), Las Vegas’ car culture, and the casino lifestyle. A few chapters combine textual and photographic essays, appropriate for treating a city whose essence is fundamentally visual. This book transcends the traditional engagement of Las Vegas’ famous Strip, offering a richer, more nuanced version of the real Las Vegas. It is an exhilarating collection of journalistic reports and academic essays, permeated by a postmodern multidisciplinary sensitivity.

In exploring the role of gender and sexuality in Las Vegas, several contributors offer candid perspectives of subjects whose stories have gone largely ignored. Similarly, the accounts of class and racial struggles in Las Vegas bring hope to other cities striving for social justice in the workplace. Several chapters focus on the plight of low-skilled and unskilled labor, on whose shoulders the success of the tourist economy of Las Vegas rests. They also provide contradictory claims: of Las Vegas allowing these workers to climb the economic ladder faster and more frequently than in most other American cities, and of Las Vegas shattering their dreams and offering them only a difficult life. In the chapter titled “The Social Cost of Rapid Urbanization in Southern Nevada,” Robert E. Parker provides additional insight about the social costs of rapid urbanization in Las Vegas, which lures more job seekers than the market demands and leaves many new and old immigrants unemployed or underemployed.

The contributors to *The Grit Beneath the Glitter* unlock the fixations of Las Vegas’ spectacle and offer resources and methods for exposing “the grit beneath the glitter” in this peculiar yet definitive city. The book has little theory but makes up for it with rich and textured historical accounts of many facets of the development of Las Vegas.

In *Neon Metropolis*, Hal K. Rothman explains how Las Vegas has evolved in the last decade “from gambling to gaming to tourism to entertainment—the culture of the future” (page xviii). In the process, the city has become “more sophisticated at reflecting the desires of the public back onto it, at creating a script for visitors that places them at the dead center of all that swirled around them” (page xxiii). The book mixes history, life stories, personal observations, and anecdotes in an engaging style.

In “Part I: Making Money,” Rothman argues that entertainment has become the center of American culture, and Las Vegas offers more of it in more forms than any other place. He maintains that Las Vegas neither creates nor nurtures entertainment: it merely buys and sells it, repackaging it as fashionable. “Part II: Filling Las Vegas,” is a convincing story of how rapid growth is reaching a point where the libertarian and individualistic traditions are tested against the demands of making the city livable. A critical part of this process is to create mechanisms of upward mobility for minorities, who will shape the nation by mid century. “Part III: Building a New City” discusses how building construction, traffic, and technology collide with the preservation of natural life, the conservation of natural resources, and development of a sense of community. Access to water features prominently, as Rothman explains how, through a combination of political savvy, technology, market and management ingenuity, and above all, money, Las Vegas has secured another 50-year supply of water.

Finally, the book sheds new light on urban phenomena such as gated communities. According to Rothman, the residents of Las Vegas have taken the “preoccupation with the self” (p. 278) beyond concerns for safety. Here, gates are used as symbols of status and prosperity. Similarly, the book unveils how the Strip has become “a wall” dividing east and west Las Vegas, as a way to protect family life and secure proper upbringing of kids in a city that “sells excess and self-indulgence, both very dangerous for youth” (p. 300). Contrary to the photos in *The Grit Beneath the Glitter*, which depict contrasts not readily apparent to visitors, the photos in *Neon Metropolis* show exactly what the tourist gaze captures. Although less sophisticated and intriguing, these photos complement the ones in *The Grit Beneath the Glitter* to jointly help the readers compose a “big visual picture” of Las Vegas.

As in *The Grit Beneath the Glitter*, theory is not a strong feature of *Neon Metropolis*. The book is a solid empirical work that could have been stronger if more attention had been given to theoretical

implications. It would also have benefited from an attempt to elaborate—even if only speculatively—on possible policy and cultural implications of Las Vegas-style development on American urbanization. Such implications could be carried further to the realm of international development—a subject touched upon in William N. Thompson’s chapter “Nevada Goes Global: The Foreign Gaming Rule and the Spread of Casinos” in *The Grit Beneath the Glitter* and a few citations and a short selected bibliography in *Neon Metropolis*.

Both books are readable and useful for a thorough understanding of Las Vegas’ development phenomenon. They are valuable references for scholars and practitioners interested in American urban trends and planning from historical, economic, geographic, demographic, real estate, and cultural perspectives. Through these perspectives, Las Vegas can become a subject of study in a course on contemporary urban phenomena, much in the same way that New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles has been used for this purpose. These two books could serve as textbooks for such educational endeavors. Although overlapping in some topics, *The Grit Beneath the Glitter* and *Neon Metropolis* complement each other. For readers preferring a single-voice, homogeneous style, and easy-to-follow structure, *Neon Metropolis* is the choice. *The Grit Beneath the Glitter* offers a kaleidoscopic (and probably a more realistic) approach to contemporary Las Vegas. But reading both books would be the most rewarding experience.

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