

**Zeitschrift:** Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am  
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

**Herausgeber:** Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

**Band:** - (2000)

**Heft:** 7

**Artikel:** Las Vegas and beyond : authentic reproductions of urban caricatures

**Autor:** Huber, Maya

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919143>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 06.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Las Vegas and Beyond: Authentic Reproductions or Urban Caricatures

### The Mirage in the Desert

Besides Disney's Magic Kingdom, there is probably no other place in the United States which is as quintessentially an American invention as Las Vegas. The name alone conjures up countless images and associations which have been fuelled by television and Hollywood: glitz and glamour, casinos, real and fake Elvises, wedding chapels.

In the short history since its foundation in 1855, Las Vegas has undergone great changes: from a Mormon settlement to a small railway stop, from the „Gateway to the Dam“ to the world's gambling capital. The rate at which this desert city is reinventing itself is extraordinary and - despite the many highs and lows - it has remained at all times the perfect surface onto which the American Dream in all its facets could and has been projected; it has always been as much an idea as a location. Few other cities have attained such fame and notoriety in such a short time. However, what in the 1960's used to be known as „Sin City“ attracting droves of gamblers, starlets, pimps and other dubious characters has quickly turned into America's most-visited tourist destination and the country's fastest growing metropolitan region.<sup>1</sup>

The gaudy neon glitter and boastful bad taste once associated with the image of Vegas has made way for a new Vegas: a family-friendly Vegas - comfortable, clean and safe. Gambling (or gaming as it has euphemistically been renamed) is for many no longer the primary objective for a visit. Couples and families go there for a relaxing weekend and business people from all over the world meet for conventions. Instead of the old Las Vegas around Freemont Street, it is now the pulsating life of the mega-casinos along the Strip which gives the city its identity. Las Vegas has become more spectacular, but less radical than it used to be, as everything is now under the tight control of a few tycoons and multinational corporations.

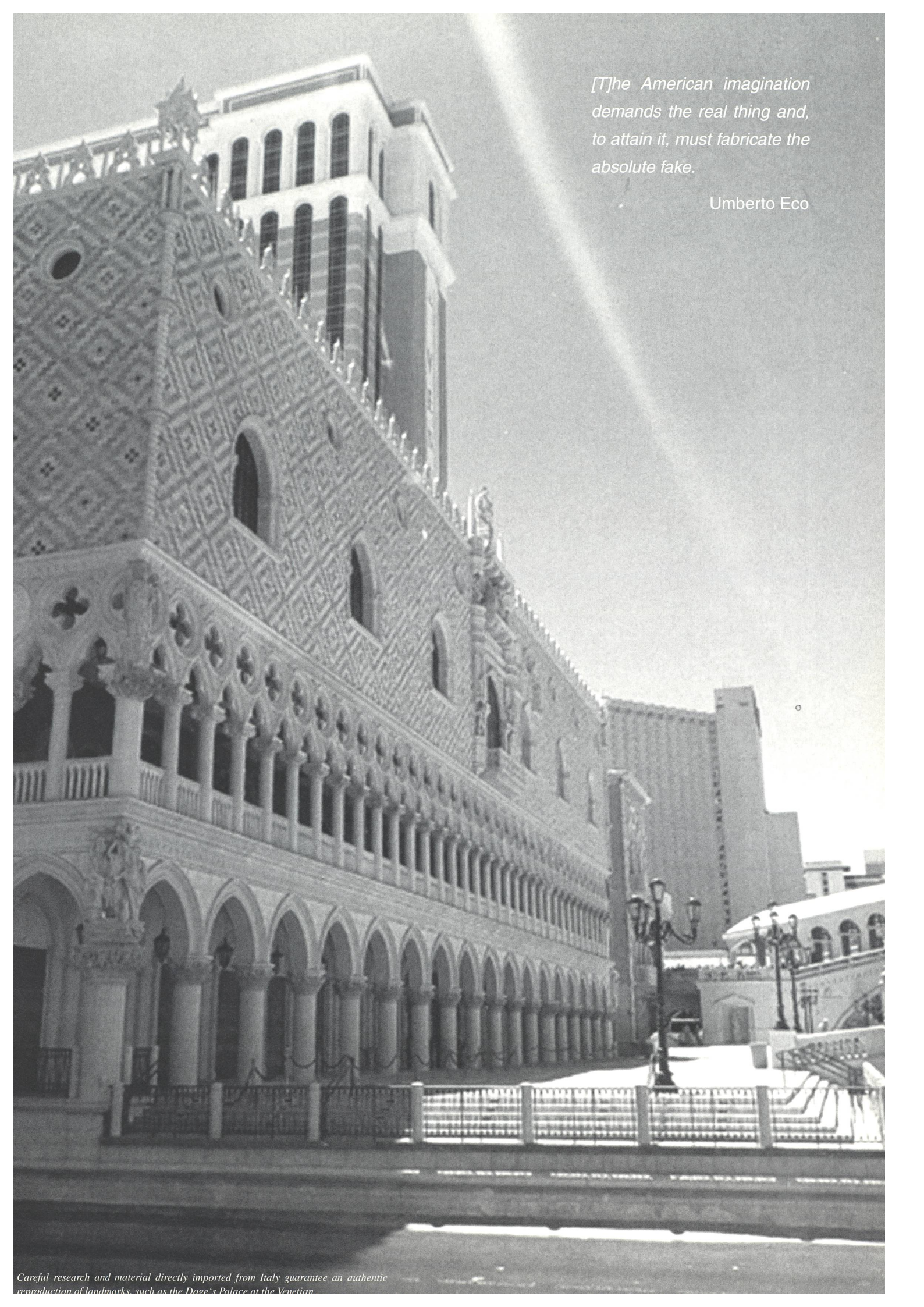
In attempting to distinguish themselves from other casinos and to attract more visitors, the new casinos have turned architecture into their main sign system, rather than relying exclusively on the tall neon signs and billboards along the streets which were typical of the Vegas of the 1970's. When 25 years ago Robert Venturi, a professor from Yale University, took a group of students to study the architecture of Las Vegas, little did they suspect that their published results *Learning From Las Vegas* would become one of the foundations of Post-modern architecture.<sup>2</sup> Other intellectuals, such as Umberto Eco also became interested in this American fantasy in the desert. In his essay „Travels in Hyperreality“ (1975) Eco claims that Las Vegas „is a city entirely made up of signs, not a city like others, which communicate in order to function, but rather a city which functions in order to communicate.“<sup>3</sup> The sign system in

1 Demographers predict that the population of the city's metropolitan region which has already passed the one million mark will reach two million by 2007. In 1997 more than 7,000 new residents arrived each month. The city of Las Vegas alone shows a growth of 400 % from 1960 to 1990. More than 30.5 million visitors per year and a more than 90% hotel occupancy rate are numbers other tourist destinations can only dream of. (cf. M. Gottdiener, Claudia C. Collins, and David R. Dickens. *Las Vegas. The Social Production of an All-American City*. 1999. pp. 94- 119.)

2 The authors of this study, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, promoted Las Vegas' vibrant, populist celebration of mass culture as an antidote to the sterile formalism of high modernist design. (cf. Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown, and Steve Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972.)

3 published in Umberto Eco. *Faith in Fakes*. London: Vintage, 1998. pp. 3-58.





*[T]he American imagination  
demands the real thing and,  
to attain it, must fabricate the  
absolute fake.*

Umberto Eco





*The constantly changing face of the Strip is moving further and further away from the image of the western frontier and many of the new casinos are themed after metropolises such as Paris, Venice or New York.*

conventional cities guides and directs people along certain axes, according to a particular city's civic infrastructure and optimised traffic flows. Las Vegas, however, was and still is centred around the Strip, catering exclusively to the economic demands of the casino industry.<sup>4</sup> Behind every sign, every sophisticated façade something is luring the „guests“ to spend more money, just as every trodden tourist path inevitably ends in front of a shop or in the case of Las Vegas in front of a slot machine. Yet despite everyone's full awareness of this, the casino's artful and spectacular designs match our personal receptors on any number of levels. Las Vegas has mastered the iconographies of desire.

### **Welcome to the Pleasure Dome - Theme Park Culture**

It is still the endless sea of neon signs and billboards rather than the mega-structures of the casinos that characterise the popular image of Las Vegas. But the tall neon signs' function as main means of communication is being replaced increasingly by the landscape in front of the casino and the actual building itself. Therein lies the main reaction to the transformation of the once forlorn shabby desert highway into one of the country's busiest pedestrian cores; the turning of the car-centred Strip into Las Vegas Boulevard for flaneurs. The very tall neon signs and billboards were designed to communicate their message to the cars travelling at highway speed. Their easy visibility bridged the wide gaps of no man's land between the few scattered casinos along the Strip. Due to the increasing density of casinos and the growing numbers of pedestrians, however, other forms of communication had to be developed; the new casinos have become self-referential theme parks, using sophisticated high-tech to convincingly create a three-dimensional environment for their guests. The large open parking lots between Strip and casinos disappeared to make room for sidewalks and landscaped environments which are now used by the casinos for the staging of fantastic spectacles.<sup>5</sup> Because many of these spectacles cannot be properly enjoyed from the car, more people leave their cars in one of the many (free) parking garages to join the steady flow of tourists on the sidewalks, which in turn increases the pressure on the casinos to offer a better spectacle than the casino down the road. However, as the elements of surprise and wonder for the visitors are wearing off very quickly, the bar for casino designers is being constantly raised to create yet another even more dazzling spectacle. Older casinos placed the gambling area as close to the entrance as possible with the noise of the slot machines spilling out onto the sidewalk. In the new casinos visitors are enticed to follow the themed narrative from the moment they stand on the sidewalk; they are lured into and gradually guided through various zones such as landscape, exterior landmarks, hotel lobby, shopping mall, restaurants and gambling area. A reversal of traditional public and private spaces is taking place which becomes

<sup>4</sup> Where else in the world are roads named after casinos and not vice-versa.

<sup>5</sup> The other, darker side of these megalomaniac spectacles is the immense ecological strain on natural resources. Las Vegas is a town of superlatives also with regard to water and electricity consumption, land management and pollution. Except for its money-generating quality, Bellagio's major attraction, a 8.5 acre lake is hardly justifiable in the middle of the desert.



particularly noticeable in the new casinos themed after real cities; commonly public spaces such as sidewalks are the private property of the casino<sup>6</sup>, while the casino-owned shopping malls imitate public spaces; covered by an artificial cloud-dotted sky, where the sun rises and sets every hour. The designers have cleverly recreate the ambience of walking through the curved and narrow streets of a city - inside a casino. Most recent casinos follow this 'interiorisation' of the city complete with typical landmarks: Baroque fountains and marble statues in Caesar's, Eiffel Tower and French bistros in the Paris casino, St. Mark's Square and Canale Grande with singing gondoliers in the Venetian, and Central Park and the Village in New York-New York. In this labyrinth the visitors are bound to get lost, acting the role of tourists in the city-within-the-casino, as they are led along pre-described routes...all eventually ending in front of a slot machine. The loss of bearings on the world outside and the resulting disorientation makes the visitors all the more receptive to the sensory impact of the immediate surroundings. These carefully orchestrated stimuli allow for a comfortable, but passive consumption of an extremely high density of pre-selected illusionary perspectives and experiences.

Even though it can be argued that Las Vegas is one of the country's oldest 'theme parks', entertaining gamblers in an Old West ambience long before Disneyland opened its gates - Disney is still the undisputed master of theme parks. The unparalleled success stories of Disneyland and Disney World inspired

6 The need for sidewalks along the car-centred Strip is a new phenomenon. As there are still no binding laws and regulations the sidewalks are officially property of the adjoining casinos. This in turn raises important questions with regard as to what degree private enterprises may interfere with traditional public spaces and the freedom of movement.

*Not only the exterior, but also the interior's perfection in the staging of a theme engulfs the visitor in a sophisticated narrative, where boundaries between spectator and actor become blurred.*





other companies to follow suit and create their own theme parks such as Sea World or Universal Studios, theme restaurants, such as Hard Rock Café or shopping malls in the form of recreated old towns.<sup>7</sup> These theme parks are easily criticised for their lack of Culture (in the sense of High Culture), yet they have already become a firmly established part of so-called popular culture. Laments about the loss or lack of Culture in television and movies also accompany themepark architecture. Taking on the role of stage designers, rather than the role of the traditional architect, theme park designers subjugate all their decisions to the creation of the perfect image or narrative - as themed three-dimensional environments they have to tell a story, but an easily accessible and manageable one. The enhanced realities and built fantasies draw the guests into a decontextualised world of perpetual celebration with endless invitations to fun. But as the high-tech special effects get better and better at simulating three-dimensional environments, visitors' expectations are also constantly raised. Illusionary perspectives and *trompe-l'oeil* effects are introduced to create carefully selected and appealing views. The negative connotations with a place or experience are eliminated and the positive ones are enhanced, creating the perfect world, which is of course a fictionalised version. Eco detects in America the need to establish reassurance through imitation, instances where „the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake.“<sup>8</sup> These artificial objects and places have established themselves securely in American life and are highly influential in re-shaping the image of the original - an original which is often very remote, distanced by space and/or time.

The growing role of deceptive simulations is evident all around us and extends well beyond the clearly defined boundaries of theme parks. Today a substantial part of our surroundings is made out of materials, images and people that appear to be something different than they are. These processes are so advanced that it is very difficult to distinguish between the fake and the real.<sup>9</sup> In a theme park like Disney's Magic Kingdom we expect everything to be fake, but in the reconstructed colonial town of Williamsburg in Virginia<sup>10</sup> for example, many believe the authentic reproductions to represent realities. Disney World and Williamsburg are both carefully edited places, in which we are pointed in one direction and steered away from others by an underlying script. This control is sometimes very obvious, sometimes carefully hidden. Visitors become - willing or unwilling - actors in a staged spectacle. On the one hand Las Vegas is promoted as a place where social hierarchies are absent, offering guests the possibility of playing the role of a millionaire for a few days, but on the other hand the visitors could also be interpreted as being reduced to „happy prisoners“ who are manipulated and controlled by the cold calculation of casino managements.<sup>11</sup> What can be witnessed in Las Vegas in a condensed form is also happening everywhere else. What and how we experience the world is increasingly shaped by choreographed events and less by individual explorations. Western consumer culture is investing more money and more time than ever before in the pursuit of diversion and happiness. Shopping has gone from a simple transaction to legitimate leisure activity and the every day choices we make are motivated by the experience value they provide - be they consumer goods, jobs, partners or political leaders.<sup>12</sup> Today's economy is moving beyond commodities, goods and services; what counts is the experience a company creates when interacting with their customers.<sup>13</sup> The most successful companies are the ones which manage to combine elements of entertainment, education, aesthetics and escapism into their product. And as all casinos are basically offering the same product - gambling facilities, retail space and hotel rooms - they have to differentiate themselves in their packaging.

The last decade in Vegas has seen a Disney-inspired theme-parkification where ever-more elaborate narratives have been wrapped around gambling and the

7 Even though it was Walt Disney who perfected the idea of a three-dimensional escape into a fantasy world, similar ideas and strategies were used for the concept and layout of the World Fairs of Paris, London, and Chicago at the turn of the 20th century.

8 Eco. 1998. p. 8

9 Ada Louise Huxtable devotes a large part of her book *The Unreal America* to a discussion of real fakes, fake fakes and the problematic of authentic reproductions. She is particularly critical of pseudo-historic reproductions which are not openly fake as e.g. Las Vegas is. (cf. *The Unreal America. Architecture and Illusion*. New York: The New Press, 1997) Gerhard Schulze makes a similar distinction between playful (spielerischen) and deceiving (lügenrischen) stage sets in his introduction to *Kulissen des Glücks*. Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 1999.

10 Colonial Williamsburg is much contested and heavily criticised by Ada L. Huxtable (1997) as it is selling the pseudo-authentic recreation of a historic site as real history.

11 A term used by Norman Klein in his essay „Der Raum summt wie ein glücklicher Wal. Scripting Las Vegas“. In: *Bauwelt* 36, 1999, pp. 2000-2005. Klein views the „architainment“ of Las Vegas as a feudal fantasy of a tourism shaped by the film industry.

12 Cf. Gerhard Schulze. *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft*. Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 1997.

13 Cf. B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore. *The Experience Economy*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999.





The casinos have worked out unifying themes for their exterior and interior: Twelve of Manhattan's landmark skyscrapers characterise New York, New York's hotel tower.

Strip has begun to resemble the layout of Disneyland. Similar to the Magic Kingdom, the casino-hotels are neatly divided into themed 'lands' along the Strip. It is therefore no wonder that it is now frequently described as Disneyland-for-adults.<sup>14</sup> There are undeniably striking similarities and influences, with strong tendencies towards a Disney-inspired skilled staging of envelopment-by-theme.

### It Takes Just One Day to See the World

An aerial taken of the new Las Vegas resembles a *capriccio* of Rome, Luxor, Venice, Paris, and New York. New York now lies just around the corner from Luxor, and from a lakeside terrace in Bellagio one can enjoy a magnificent view of the Eiffel tower and Garnier's Opéra. Many new casinos are themed after real cities. Is it a coincidence that it is exactly in the most quintessential of American cities that we find mini-replicas of the European metropolises? They reflect the fantasies and dreams of today's clientele; for a larger number of people the idea of an escape to Venice or Paris is much more alluring than a few days on a ranch or in a western saloon.<sup>15</sup> In their imagination it is especially European cities such as Rome, Paris or Venice - the cradles of Western art and culture - which are seen as romantic getaways. The prevailing myths of these places - real and fictional ones - have been carefully analysed by market researchers. These fantasies and images shared by large parts of contemporary society form the raw material for the theme park factories which then turn this blend of fantasy and reality into extravagant architecture and choreographed landscape. Paris and New York are now just a five-minute taxi drive apart, whereas travelling to these places traditionally means long journeys, involving risk, expense and inconvenience, it is now possible to see the world in just a day - or at least a state-of-the-art facsimile thereof.

The contextual void theme parks offer makes them perfect surfaces for the projection of dreams and fantasies of all kinds. Real cities like Rome, Paris or New York all conjure up very specific images of what gives these cities their authentic identity. Images and stories have been disseminated through books, television and movies to a hitherto unparalleled extent. People who have never visited these places will come up with almost identical lists of characteristics and important sights as those who have visited the real place. Although these themed environments can be very persuasive, nobody who travels to this desert mirage is really that naïve, believing themselves to have arrived in the real city for that matter. The themed resorts are not and will never be real places, but they are also not meant to be. These Hollywood fantasies are given reality making it possible to escape the limitations of everyday life for a short time. We know it is a fake, just as we do when we see a film, play a computer game

14 Cf. Anderson, Kurt. „Las Vegas, USA“. In: *Time*, 143:2, 1994, pp. 42-51.

15 In an effort to redevelop the area around the old casinos on Fremont Street, a consortium of ten casinos joined with the city to construct the Fremont Street Experience in 1994. A canopy covers the four most famous city blocks of Fremont Street which have been turned into a pedestrian zone thereby creating a new mega-casino with the theme of the 'old Vegas'.





*The casinos offer replicas featuring exactly those quintessential elements which make a city immediately recognisable.*

and know it is not real; even though we see the seams we quite generously play along. What counts is the entertainment value and the real emotions which are evoked: wonder, happiness, and pleasure.

The casinos offer replicas featuring exactly those quintessential elements which make a city immediately recognisable and endow it with authenticity and familiarity. The condensed fantasies, however, can be enjoyed comfortably, conveniently and interchangeably; fine-tuned organisation and elaborate safety measures guarantee a stress-free and safe experience. Soon more people will have visited the places recreated there than the original sites.<sup>16</sup> The hotel staff of the Paris casino greets all guests with a friendly „Bonjour“, the baker with his bicycle loaded full of baguettes does not mind to be stopped to pose for a photo, and the flaneurs on the cobble-stoned Rue de la Paix find everything from French designer clothes to lavender sachets and can sit down in a bistro for a café au lait and a fresh pain-au-chocolat - all that without having to change dollars into French Francs or struggle with a foreign language.

What complicates matters further is that despite the full awareness and acceptance that all of Las Vegas is to a certain degree fake - the fascination with the authentic remains. It is therefore no wonder that casino brochures are full of statements pointing out the carefully researched authentic reproductions their resorts feature: Michelangelo's David, the Doge's Palace, or the Statue of Liberty.<sup>17</sup> The oxymoron 'authentic reproduction' has become the commonly accepted and widely used euphemism for the negatively-connotated 'fake'. Eco describes America as „a country obsessed with realism, where, if a reconstruction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a „real“ copy of the reality being represented.“<sup>18</sup> Opened in 1998, the Bellagio is - at 1.6 billion US dollars - the most expensive resort hotel and casino ever built. Even though it is named after a town on Lake Como it is not meant to replicate this one particular village, but to represent the essence of old world elegance and romance best captured in images of the Italian and French Riviera. Not a particular place, but the theme of 'the real' is promoted and the resort's authenticity is permanently stressed: a real lake, real mosaics, real

16 It has also become questionable to what extent the Venice in Italy is still 'real' or whether it has turned into a stage set for visitors underlying the same principles of a tourist-oriented experience economy as the Venice in the desert.

17 The management of e.g. the Venetian prides itself on having sent several art historians to Venice, Italy to research on site and for having flown in Italian materials and craftspeople to 'authentically reproduce' the sights.

18 Eco, 1998, p. 4.



flowers, real natural light in the shopping arcade and a real art gallery. The Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art, which exhibits twenty-eight European and American Masters and Bellagio's 'Picasso' Restaurant, where guests can dine surrounded by the master's originals, were first thought to be 'lost-leaders' (non-money making attractions). It turns out that, despite great controversies, they have become the resort's main attractions. Nobody expected that High Culture would appeal to the same people peregrinating to the gaudy entertainment capital in the desert. Yet as the great success of exhibiting 'real art' at Bellagio has proven there seems to be a demand for both High culture and popular culture.<sup>19</sup> Endowing something with the label 'real art' or 'authentic' increases its value and esteem. Artistic creation in particular is valued as a form of self-definition and individualism - two central notions of contemporary Western society.<sup>20</sup>

What is amazing is the extent to which we have come to share the same set of symbols, meanings, and beliefs. Despite their decontextualisation, the national icons and motifs making up the casino-pastiches of Paris, Venice or New York, are immediately recognisable. Through the media's transnational distribution of popular culture and dissemination of values, it has become possible for the creators of theme parks to reach, appeal to and influence an ever-growing body of people all over the world.

### Tomorrowland? Creating Community in Celebration, Florida

Real towns are now starting to imitate the imitations. More and more towns have theme parks or feature at least some theme park elements - be they newly created pedestrian zones in a hitherto non-existing 'olde town' or brand-new skyscrapers which look older than the ones built twenty years ago. A Disney park entertains its guests for one day, Las Vegas allows visitors to escape every-day reality for a long weekend, but the ultimate themed environment is currently to be found at the borders of Disney World in the town of Celebration, Florida.<sup>21</sup>

Celebration represents what Disney World's EPCOT Center was originally destined to be, namely an Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow. It is a place where like Main Street, USA in the Magic Kingdom a mythic small-town America is recreated. Nothing is missing: children playing on the lawn in front of white porches, a couple reading the paper on a bench along the lake, people chatting in front of the grocer's in the Victorian-looking town centre, a friendly police officer sipping a cup of coffee at the diner. This is real-life *Pleasantville*<sup>22</sup> where people are neither actors nor visitors, but they are actually living there. Celebration is 'perfect'; planned from the ground and built in just a few years, it is Walt Disney Company's attempt at New Urbanism. New Urbanism is a movement in architecture advocating a return to small town America, where people have a sense of place and community. It draws on a romantic revisionism of a past, when apparently everybody knew their neighbours, one could walk to work, lawns were perfectly mowed, a sense of community prevailed and social friction was absent. There is an enormous consumer demand for small town living and community, where people hope to find the stability and safety they miss elsewhere. Celebration represents consumer society's latest version of the American Dream.

However, just as entrance fees for theme parks are quite steep, and Las Vegas derives its income from gambling, Celebration has its price, too. The homes are sold on average for \$ 300,000 which makes them affordable for a middle class clientele, although their price makes the community clearly an economically segregated enclave. Even though new urbanism dictates diversity in structures, there are strict building codes; only a certain limited number of house types (all pre-1940's!) and colours can be chosen from a pattern book. All houses feature over-sized front porches and lawns facing the sidewalks to



© Disney

*Planned from the ground and built in just a few years, Celebration is Walt Disney Company's attempt at New Urbanism.*

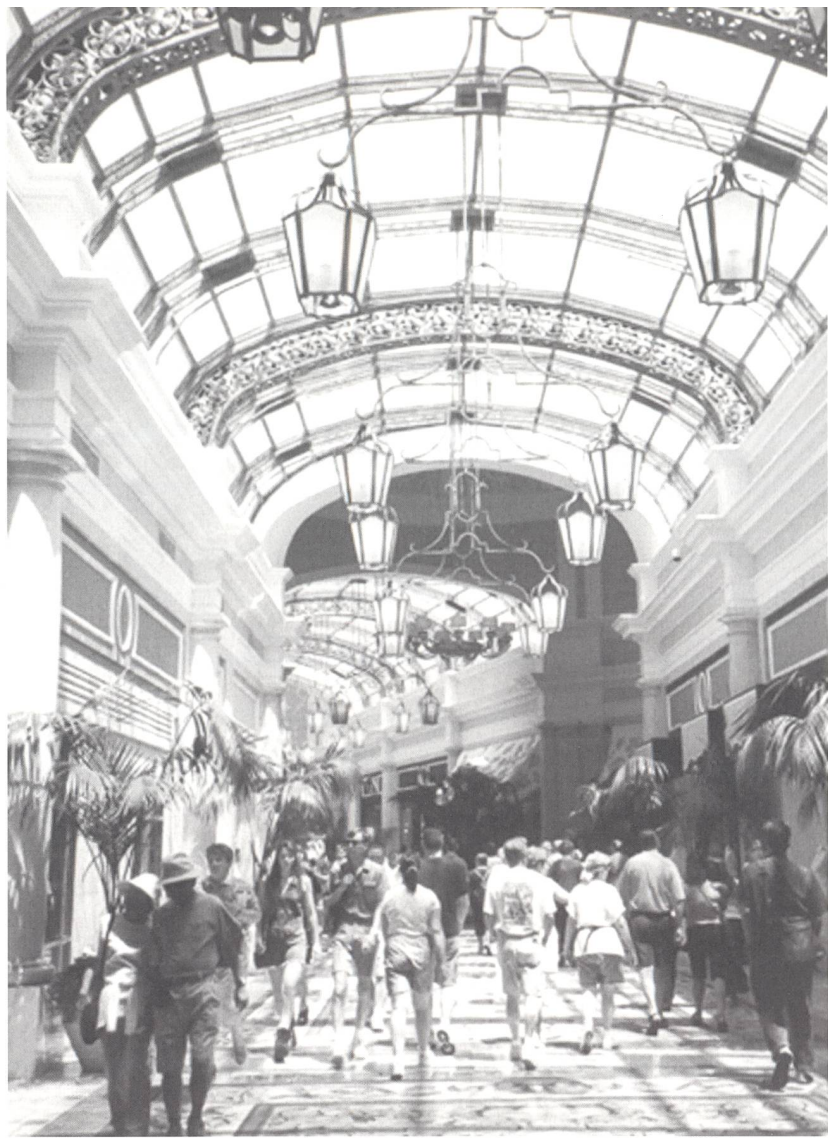
19 Even the Bellagio management was stunned to find people willing to line up for more than one and a half hours and pay twelve dollars to visit the art gallery.

20 cf. Charles Taylor. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. London, England and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

21 Another such example is Seaside, Florida, which became internationally better known as Seahaven - the town featuring in *The Truman Show* (1998, directed by Peter Weir). Probably only few realised that Seahaven was not a plywood movie set, but a real community in the south of Florida near Panama City Beach.

22 Title of a film directed by Gary Ross (1998) in which a teenager who loves to watch a 1950's soap actually finds himself magically transported back in time to the animated stage-set of the soap.





*Bellagio's theme of the real extends to the use of natural light in its upscale shopping mall arcade.*

encourage neighbourly interaction, while all garages have to be in the back accessed by smaller alleys. But whose sense of nostalgia is Disney really selling with its new old-style hometown? This is a nostalgia for a past that has never existed but which has been fed by television and movies. However, if everything looks real, it is enough to seem real to be given authenticity, even if it never existed.<sup>23</sup> Celebration is the perfect example of how by defying history as something that is gone forever, the simulacra are given equal value and credibility. More than anything it is an escape from dealing with the real problems - social, economical and ecological - which our society is facing today. But New Urbanism and Celebration's return to a quasi-feudal hierarchy under Disney can hardly be the answer to problems of suburban sprawl and the deterioration of inner cities, which have led to a wide-spread anti-urbanist attitude in the States. The town was built on Disney property, designed by Disney, and is managed by Celebration Company, a subsidiary of Walt Disney Corporation. Politically it cannot even be considered a proper town as there is no elected government, only a council made up of members of the Residential Owners' Association and representatives of the Celebration Company - with the Company having the last say in every decision. The notion of safety and stability, but also the lack of responsibilities (and rights) as everything is being taken care of by Disney, makes Celebration paradise for some, a totalitarian state for others.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Eco, 1998, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. cultural critic Andrew Ross' account of living in Celebration for one year in: *The Celebration Chronicles: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Property Values in Disney's New Town*. New York: Ballantine, 1999.

Jean Baudrillard's comment on Disneyland in his essay „Simulacra and Simulation“ (1980) can also be extended to Celebration. Both places express a nostalgia for a reality which has been long lost and are part of „a proliferation of



myths of origin, a panic-stricken production of the real, leading to the creation of a hyperreality.<sup>25</sup> These *Ersatzwelten* cater to the needs, fears and dreams of today's consumer culture - needs and demands which to a large degree have been created by marketing strategies of the experience economy in the first place.

### All the World Is a Theme Park

Las Vegas is still at the frontier and the epitome of all things American. It has functioned as a mirror of the American Dream and most of what was first pioneered there has found its way back to America. The phenomenon of Las Vegas, however, extends well beyond its forms and symbols which - like Venturi's prediction - have influenced the look of other American towns, and have made Las Vegas a hotly-debated topic in American urbanism. This mirage in the desert is also more than just a mere playground for children of all ages and shrewd businesspeople - it offers the perfect allegory of contemporary consumer culture. If we perceive Las Vegas to have become much more mainstream in recent years, it is because the values of America have changed, not those of Las Vegas.<sup>26</sup> Umberto Eco's poignant description of Las Vegas, made 25 years ago, as a city which „functions in order to communicate“ has remained valid, but its description can be extended to a general trend witnessed everywhere.

It is still the dictates of consumerism which determine the face of Las Vegas, yet the means of communication have come a long way from the two-dimensional neon signs and decorated street façades of the 1970's. Not only Las Vegas, but also Disney's theme parks exemplify how such three-dimensional escapes can be invented out of ‚nothing‘ in the middle of ‚nowhere‘. They are of a virtual reality - instant environments which serve as temporary events, where entertainment and experiences are sold for a short period of time, offering visitors the realisation of their deepest dreams: transcendence of reality - even if only for a moment. In a world where many opportunities are closed to us, where the real world is often too threatening, confusing, or inconvenient, the theme parks offer a journey through symbolic worlds that are objective and material, but at the same time as carefree and fantastic as the imagination. The ‚imageers‘ of this simulation culture attempt to re-enchant the world. The improved re-creation is valued over the flawed original, as positive elements and feel-good factors are enhanced while negative connotations are eliminated. Contemporary consumer society is not about converting physical resources into goods and services any longer, but based on selling experiences and feelings. Lives and identities are being constructed through the consumption of commodities whose symbolic forms become more important than the actual varying contents. This pursuit of happiness is taken yet to another level by extending the parameters of space and time in the recreations of mythic small-town America - not only for temporary visits but as places to live. They and the recent trend in city-themed casino design are only some manifestations of how our surroundings and in particular our cultural resources are transformed into paid-for personal experiences and entertainment. And when malls become international tourist attractions, Orlando and Las Vegas are America's two most-visited travel destinations and people wait in line to move to Celebration, it is only a matter of time before someone will attempt to build an authentic recreation of Las Vegas and before the boundaries and seams between the various themed environments blur and eventually disappear.

This essay was first published in Fall 2000 in a similar version in *Fälschungen*, the fifth volume of *variations* (Literaturzeitschrift der Universität Zürich), general editor Thomas Hunkeler. Reprinted by permission of Peter Lang AG, Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, Bern.

Maya Huber ist Doktorandin und arbeitet am Englischen Seminar der Universität Zürich.

25 in Lodge, David (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory. A Reader*. 2nd ed. rev. by Nigel Wood. Harlow: Longman, 2000. pp 403-412.

26 Cf. Anderson, 1994.