

Fantasies of the Strip: Desire and Illusion in Las Vegas

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Introduction

I won \$119.05!

(Delores, Gambler at Harrah's who spent \$200 gambling, but considered herself a winner that day)

Everyone is a winner in the fantasy environment of Las Vegas. Casino-resorts offer an anthology of themes that represent cherished myths in our culture: the Wild West, castles and knights, and adventure in exotic lands. These simulacrum provide images, styles, and architectures that create extraordinary effects, especially at night. This paper categorizes and analyzes the past, present, and future themes of the Las Vegas strip.

Casinos leave nothing to chance, except chance itself. Their themes seduce and control people in complex situations. They segregate customers into iconic cathedrals of reassurance and define the meaning of entertainment (Fox 474). Themes create a hyperreality that gives consumers the impression that they are playing in "a privileged immemorial space, where things lose their shadow, where money loses its value" (Baudrillard 128). This makes it easier for casinos to extract cash from their customers.

Whatever Las Vegas looks like in the future, one cannot conceive of restraint or conventionality lessening the ability of Las Vegas to make money and provide entertainment for visitors. Corporate executives are currently making research-based decisions on themes that will determine how the casinos of tomorrow will appear, attract customers, and return a profit to stockholders.

Themes on the Strip

As Las Vegas grew, it was to become an entire city of themes.
(Hess 33)

The history of themes on the strip has four periods: western, heavy, light, and de-theming. The Las Vegas strip began before World War II when Western themed casinos opened south of the city on the highway to Los Angeles. The El Rancho Vegas motel opened in 1941, followed by the Last Frontier a mile further south. These casinos sought shelter from city taxes and space for parking lots by building in an unincorporated section of Clark County aptly named Paradise. Strip architecture still reflects a desire to make right-hand turns off Las Vegas Boulevard easy for motorists. The first casinos were little more than what architect Robert Venturi called "decorated sheds" that housed gambling halls (106).

Heavily Themed Hotel-Casinos

Las Vegas seems to have completely left behind any pretense of representing reality, instead presenting possibilities.
(Ritzer 115)

Jay Sarno ushered in the era of heavily themed casinos when he opened Caesars Palace (1966). There is no apostrophe in Caesars. Sarno wanted everyone to feel that it was his or her palace. Circus Circus, Excalibur, New York New York, Paris, and the Venetian are heavily themed casinos. The only way to de-theme these casinos is to implode them.

The landscaping, architecture, signage, and uniforms of the employees at Caesars Palace reinforce the Roman theme. Centurions in armor greet guests at the door. The cocktail waitresses wear modified togas.

Animations of Roman gods grace the Forum Shops. Loyal customers believe that Caesars, with its lingering memories of the past, has more vegasosity than any other casino on the strip.

Investors responded to the success of Caesars by building new casino-resorts “based on history, fantasy, or exotic locales” (Hess 11). Circus Circus (1968) has a strong lock on its customer base. Seven percent of the parties visiting Las Vegas include someone under twenty-one. Sometimes it seems they are all at Circus Circus.

The owners of Circus Circus modeled Excalibur (1990) after Neuschwanstein in Bavaria. Its red, blue, and gold towers and turrets cue the theme. Hess notes that the Excalibur is less successful in “making the transition from outside to inside” (103). The Medieval theme is diluted with subthemes like Thunder Down Under, a review that showcases scantily clad men, and Dick’s Last Resort, a sports pub that features rude waitresses.

New York New York (1997) simulates a romanticized New York City during the first half of the twentieth century. It features landmarks like the Empire State, Chrysler, and Woolworth buildings. The interior decorations display many art deco touches, especially around the Radio City area. Like the real New York City, it is often noisy and crowded.

Paris (1999) doesn’t look or smell like the real Paris. It does showcase a 460 foot Eiffel tower, a Grandolfer balloon, two shopping promenades and excellent restaurants. Mon Ami Gabi serves genuine French café food at a reasonable price, but expect long lines and a wait.

Sheldon Anderson, the owner of the Venetian (1999), has a passion for detail. Art and culture critic William Fox termed the layering of themed replication in his all suite casino-hotel “the densest in town,” with full size models of the Grand Canal and the Rialto bridge, as well as, reproductions of frescoes by Titian and Tintoretto (Fox 40). Unlike the real Venice, the gondolas are motorized and the water in the canal is clean.

Lightly Themed Casinos

Contentment and opulence are the hallmarks of your luxury hotel experience.

(Bellagio Website).

There are two reasons why the trend is towards lightly themed casino-hotels with all the amenities: the changing nature of the gaming business and the example of entrepreneur, Steve Wynn. In 1992, gaming revenues represented 54 percent of the overall cash flow. In 2008, Las Vegas earned 40 percent of its overall earnings from gaming and the rest from amenities such as restaurants, shopping, spas, nightclubs, shows, and golf. (See appendix 1).

Wynn earned enough in the family’s bingo operation in Maryland to buy a small stake in the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas. He turned it into an enormously profitable casino-resort. Wynn opened the Mirage, in 1989 and Treasure Island in 1993. He established a new paradigm for luxury casinos when he opened the Bellagio in October 1998.

Wynn based the theme of the Bellagio on a Swiss-Italian resort at Lake Como, but its core theme is about pampering its upscale clientele. The Bellagio’s website reassures, “It’s not pretentious if you’ve earned it” (<http://www.bellagio.com>). This property appeals to all seven deadly sins: greed, sloth, lust, envy, pride, wrath, and gluttony.

The exterior features a huge lake and fountains that dance to music. The lobby showcases Dale Chihuly’s ceiling sculpture, Fiori di Como, fashioned from 2164 blown glass flowers. The hotel contains an indoor botanical garden that changes its display with the seasons and the world’s tallest chocolate fountain. Wynn believed that people came to “Las Vegas for all kinds of stimulation, the animation of the casino, the restaurants and all the rest,” but that they also cared “for quiet moments of reflective beauty,” so he added a Gallery of fine Art (Binkley 85).

Wynn sold his casinos to Kirk Kerkorian for \$6.4 billion in May 2000. This sale ushered in the era of corporate gaming. Kerkorian formed MGM Mirage (MGM NYSE) to manage sixteen properties and joint ventures around the world. Their Las Vegas properties include the MGM, Mirage, Mandalay Bay, Luxor, Bellagio, Excalibur, Caesar’s Palace, New York New York, and Circus Circus.

Wynn used the proceeds of the sale to build Wynn’s casino-resorts in Las Vegas and Macau. He promised his Las Vegas property would be, “the single most wonderful resort in the history of Las

Vegas” (Briggs). It features gambling, posh rooms, five-star restaurants, and a Ferrari dealership in the lobby. Many believed Wynn’s approach heralded the future of casino-resorts; one that implodes the boundaries between entertainment options for the affluent.

The well-to-do clientele of Mandalay Bay consider it more fun than more pretentious casinos. One reporter described it as overthemed, a juxtaposition of themes designed to appeal to a variety of demographic groups. The property’s Asian, South Sea, fantasy island, water park theme, has nothing to do with reality. Mandalay is a town in Myanmar, a country headed by a brutal and repressive right-wing junta, in South-East Asia. It is located on a river, not a bay.

Mandalay Bay devotes its upper floors to an exclusive hotel within a hotel, The Four Seasons. Mandalay Bay features luxury suites, top name performers and events, and a pool with an eleven-acre beach, a wave machine, and topless sunbathing area. It has thirteen fantastic restaurants including, Raffles, with its wonderful breakfast buffet.

De-Theming

We’re not a British museum with ancient artifacts.

(Felix Rapport, CEO of Luxor, *USA Today*).

When the MGM Grand opened in December 1973, its green exterior with gold trim reflected its role as the Emerald City in a Wizard of Oz theme. In 2000, corporate executives adopted a classic films theme. The real theme of the MGM Grand is a phrase used on the hotel’s website, “Maximum Vegas” (www.mgmgrand.com). This slogan refers to the vast amount of activities the hotel offers its guests. The casino-resort, features five outdoor pools, rivers and waterfalls, a convention center, Television City, Grand Spa, a Lion attraction, and sixteen restaurants.

Zahi Hawass, Head of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities, advised the builders of Luxor (1993), a 4408-room casino-hotel in the shape of a pyramid. Architects wanted guests to feel that they were entering an archaeological dig. Management soon scuttled the reed boats that ferried guests to the inclinators that took them to their rooms, but the property remained true to the Egyptian theme.

Rapport announced a \$300 million, three-year makeover in July 2007. He described the property as an “overthemed dormitory” (Luxor – Viva Las Vegas). People booked rooms there so that they could play in adjacent resorts. He added Fantasy, billed as the strip’s most seductive topless review, and changed the name of the buffet, Pharaoh’s Feast, to More. Rapport noted that the demographics for the hotel have begun to change. This may help his balance sheet, but even if Rapport dethemes the interior, the Luxor is still a large black glass pyramid.

Several other casinos have dropped major themes. A few chairs and wall panels are all that remain of the Hilton’s immensely popular Star Trek attraction. Sexy sirens replaced brawny pirates in the free show that takes place in the man-made lagoon in front of Treasure Island. Dr. David Schwartz, director of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Center for Gaming Research noted, “It’s the way the city is going. It’s more about attracting a younger, hip audience” (“Luxor – Viva Las Vegas”).

Conclusion

Las Vegas is built on sand and ever changing. In fact it is whatever you want it to be.

(Garon 172)

The current trend toward lightly themed casinos with all the amenities made La Vegas vulnerable to a recession. Howard Stutz, a reporter for the Las Vegas Review Journal, noted, “Almost every casino on the strip could be on the verge of bankruptcy” (Gibson). Hotel occupancy is down 15 percent. The cost of a room has dropped 20 percent. Gambling revenue is off 15 percent. MGM sold TI to Phil Ruffin on 20 March 2009 in an effort to increase their cash balance and shore up their stock, down by 95 percent.

The casino-resorts of Las Vegas have launched unprecedented promotional events in an effort to work their way through the recession. Young working people who previously could not have afforded Las Vegas are going. They are not the high rollers that Las Vegas prefers, but they are customers. Once they sample the delights of Vegas, they will return, even if prices are higher.

It is time for Las Vegas to go back to its roots. Despite well-known statistics to the contrary, people expect to win, and they will come to Las Vegas to gamble. Gaming has a higher profit margin and is less subject to downturns in the economy than the other services that casinos market. Casino-resort

management should remember that Steve Wynn began in a bingo hall. Forget about the posh amenities and roll the dice.

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Appendix 1.

Reasons given by people in percentage as to why they visited Las Vegas from Annual Report 2007 by GLS Research for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Bureau.

