18. Outside the Labyrinth: Architainment in Las Vegas

Within the past decade, one vast but brief era in global culture simply vanished—1989–1993—and a new stage replaced it. The transformation took less than ten years. Trillions of dollars changed hands. But oddly enough, much of it went unnoticed. Media simply whitewashed its impact, while it remade thousands of cultural destinations through the nineties, until 2001: museums; theme parks; cities old and new; shopping malls; casinos; the Internet; computer games; miniaturized data erasures and other new cycles of collective forgetting; globalized broadcast feudalism; surveillance as mass entertainment; and more.

How eerie: Did all this pass in our sleep? Since I write so often about Los Angeles and Las Vegas, I have been forced to watch the process up close. You might say both cities have sped along on parallel tracks, but that would oversimplify their relationship to each other. Las Vegas has often been called a colony of Los Angeles,[1] even in the mercantilist sense, similar to the seventeenth century. Los Angeles came at the end of many colonizing ventures of Nevada: the railroads, mining industries, and now tourism.

This was a colonial relationship where resources were harvested. But it also anticipates "warlord economies" built by globalization—by "predatory transnational companies with no allegiance to a given country."[2] Thus, after Americans invaded,[3] global kleptocrats unsuccessfully replaced traditional elites in Afghanistan.[4] Now in 2003, under the shadow of America's war on terrorism, global entertainment is still adapting. The plantation economy in casinos shifted into a new stage—more gambling operations shifting into cities, new ways to erase memory, identity, sense of place. After 2001, Vegas special effects fell under the embrace of homeland rule (Bushism). Various of the bombers for 9/11 holidayed in Vegas! We must avoid too much easy melodrama. There is enough from day to day on Fox News.

As pundits often say, we live in a civilization increasingly without much of an inner life anyway, only the right medication.[5] That is a familiar trope. Since the late nineties, there were enough special-effects movies about the matrix stealing your memory; taking your identity; about suicide bombings and apocalyptic, endless wars. Better to demystify wherever possible—no nostalgia, no noir glamour. Simply put: many global entertainment industries happen to be head-quartered in Las Vegas and Los Angeles. And these probably contain the most mature variations of special effects in the world.

However, the Vegas nineties are over. No major casinos are in the planning stages. A certain caution has taken over, in Vegas terms. In fact, my research indicates that Vegas futurologists were already sensing the end as early as March 2001, when Steve Wynn's Mirage Corporation was bought out by MGM. They sensed an airline and investment crisis six months before 9/11. In fact, Las Vegas is a barometric culture, the home of mutable architecture, and mutable branding. When it implodes a building, it also erases memory on a scale that seems unrivaled. All casinos will peel down over the next few years, and remutate. Within twenty years, many, in fact, will be gone, or almost unrecognizable. Las Vegas is a laboratory for special effects as erasure.

In February 2003, spokesmen revealed how casinos were bracing for war.[6] They would "take a page out of the playbook" used during the Gulf War and after 9/11. They would "redouble" the speed of marketing toward "short feeder markets within three hours or less." They discount for "drive-ins" from Southern California and Arizona. After 9/11, people saw Las Vegas "as a safe destination," "to escape, get away."

But "you have to be careful not to market too soon," a spokesman from Mirage explained. "The public has historically been interested in escapes from what is going on in the world and, for millions, Las Vegas will still serve that purpose. We just need to be sensitive to the timing.

In the meantime, Zumanity, the new $15 million "erotic cabaret" at Bellagio, is set to travel to New York as well.[7] Stratosphere has added a stripper and lapdancer water volleyball tournament, as more spice for its Wild Nights Pool Party, running through August: "the girls hanging out with the regular Joes."[8] At Treasure Island lagoon, the British navy and buccaneers are being docked, to be replaced in October by "half clad sirens swinging from the rigging and sashaying down the plank."[9] The Sapphire is adding gyrating women to its large-screen TV showings of Lakers basketball. At the Tabu Lounge in the MGM Grand, tequila shots are now served between bare breasts. This is hardly new; but surely a trend. Mayor Goodman explains: "the new brand we're creat-

ing is one of freedom based on sensuality … The bottom line is that people can come, go to the brink of whatever's legal without having anyone looking over their shoulder."[10] That includes children. The children-friendly Vegas of 1992 was mostly a failure. Parents do not like seeing their children right after they lose the mortgage money. What's more, when trauma sets in nationally, casinos return to reliable standbys. A local reporter added: "What casinos realized was that they needed the kind of shows that send everybody out drunk and excited and in a wild frenzy to gamble."[11] Anxiety to gamble fits well with political anxieties.

Similarly, after the Gulf War, during a massive recession, casino revenues grew rapidly, even peaked in 1995. Casinos are indeed like the canary in the coal mine. But in a mining state, these canaries have learned the history of forgetting.

So to begin, I review the tools I can bring to bear on this Vegas of 2003.

Scripted Spaces

Imagine walking through a sequence of rooms or alleys. The space between has been scripted for you; that is, a street or interior where the spectator imagines herself as a central character in an imaginary story. Presumably the walker experiences free will, though often that is an illusion, and the spectator knows it. Nevertheless, you are willing to bow to the authority of the feedback program.

Since 1955, the number of scripted spaces in the developed consumer world has multiplied geometrically. This spawning process was pioneered in both southern California and Las Vegas. Disneyland opened on the Fourth of July in 1955, while in April of the same year, five casinos opened on the Vegas Strip.

You might call Disneyland and Vegas the Janus twins: Las Vegas was dubbed the "Disneyland for adults;"[12] Los Angeles the "Las Vegas for families."[13] Both converted resort destinations into suburbs. Anaheim had been cheap orchard land before Disney's team installed the great berm there. The Strip was not even a suburb in 1941, simply a blank just outside city limits, a neck of desert on the way to the tiny McCarron Airport. But in ten years, casinos were stuck out on the Strip, mostly to avoid city taxes and city police, creating a job base that supported new suburbs.

Both struggled to lure Angelinos by car. Disneyland linked to the new freeway coming from Los Angeles. The Strip literally ran on Highway 91,[14] a two-lane road from LA. Like many investors across the U.S., they were trying to

capitalize on the federal interstate highway plan of 1953. In ten years, billions of government dollars brought a twenty-thousand-mile grid of interlocking freeways from one coast to the other. L.A. became the hub on the Pacific. Both Disney and casino owners hoped that caravans from southern California could now drive hundreds of miles for a day's pleasure.

Both projects turned into job pools that supported new suburbs. Both "Los Angelized" the surrounding metropolitan areas.[15] Of course, newly minted suburbs were transforming rural towns across the country in 1955, particularly in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. But there were dozens of symbiotic forces at work—nationally and internationally. The sum of these started the race for capital that led to the globalized ("warlord") economy by 2000. For example, the television industry came of age by 1955, shifting toward film stock, moving offices from New York to L.A., finding European links; as did the airline industry, the credit card industry, the Holiday Inn chain, McDonald's, the dealer system for art in New York; and dozens of new ad agencies only a taxi ride away.

Viennese émigré Victor Gruen designed the first enclosed shopping mall in Minneapolis in 1956. Throughout the country, at the crossing of freeways, thousands of new shopping centers were added within a few years. This was indeed the first stage toward globalization—the consumer expansion around the automobile. By 1980, the era of consumer "autopia" ended, but by then, it had linked across five continents, and was in the process of globalizing production itself.

By 1955, the Korean War had been setttled,[16] but the hunger to keep the American economy pumped up continued. Like an athlete on steroids, the U.S. had to remain on constant war alert for another fifty years. With what even Eisenhower called—with grave concern—"the military-industrial complex" came massive investments in miniaturizing energy for missiles, for space flights; and to miniaturize Computers and radios and design advanced telematic hookups by satellite. All of these, ironically enough, fed the globalizing consumer investments, from the J.S. to the newly energized western Europe to Japan on the edge of Vietnamese overflow of capital. Even the rudiments of the Internet came out of American defense spending (ARPANET, 1965). Indeed the Cold War turned out to be a laboratory for electronic civilization, on behalf of NATO in particular.

But along with the computer, came the NATO economy, dubbed the "Free World" by Euro-American investors across continents. These investors supported a rapidly growing pool for global tourism. That pool finally lured

millions of visitors to the U.S., in stages after the fifties. Inevitably, Las Vegas specialized in fast weekends for high rollers across five continents.

The marketing within this flood relied on global English—nine hundred words for TV, petrodollars, MTV, computers, NATO, even diplomacy at the EU. This business dialect spoke for the electronic consumer. Year by year, the percentage of overall profit from global English movies shrank in the U.S., as it grew in Europe and Asia. Increasingly, investments for these products came from three continents. And for a time, it seemed that Mideast oil and Japanese export power could rival the NATO entertainment juggernaut. And by the 1980s, a global cultural transformation was essentially in place from western Europe all the way to Japan. It would shift many times, but mostly, all that was needed next was the fall of communism to open the flood gates of global investment. The military-industrial capital would diminish while the entertainment capital would grow, until at last, all forms of heavy industry shared the same software as the movies, ad agencies, mall architects.

After the Berlin Wall came down, electronic consumer culture became the global brand for triumphal capitalism, with Las Vegas as one of its mythic headquarters. High rollers came as much from Europe and east Asia as from the U.S. Las Vegas joined NATO-fied entertainment—as did L.A., of course. German companies funneled hundreds of millions for filmmaking in southern California. French investors bought Universal Studios—from Canadians, who bought it from the Japanese. It was mercantilism in Web time.

That corrosive speed, with barely any legal oversight, has brought on warlord systems to fill the gaps, hordes without borders. A data flux has dissolved many institutional controls within the nation-state. Data rejects nationality. It erases boundaries blindly, a free-for-all, these feudal stopgaps (Electronic Feudalism) leading to grim localized wars, narco-capitalism, globalized immigration; transnational eco-blocs; the L.A. up-rising in 1992; Russian cities abandoned to mafiosi. But this erosion with a cybernetic smile has its preferred "look": gaudy, immersive effects as an Electronic Baroque. Since 1989 in particular, "it" has installed "its" brands across the world: narrated themed architecture. With the Electronic Baroque, cities, movies, museums and "historic" city centers begin to look like each other. As a result, entertainment has been homogenized as never before. Cultural censorship is more complete than at any time since the Counter-Reformation. I imagine Baroque popes and princes dedicating shopping malls, with all the trimmings.

The signature of the Electronic Baroque is the occluded, immersive, scripted space, modeled at first on shopping malls, casinos, theme parks.

After 1989 in particular, these spaces went beyond their enclosures, to enter the cityscapes of European cities themselves, or as Vegas copies of Europe—or in Singapore, Tokyo. Neo Baroque effects grew more popular in East Asia. Even at the origins of the Baroque, to accommodate globalized tourism, European town centers have been rehabbed for a catholicity unknown since the pilgrimages of the Middle Ages; or since the European world's fairs from 1851 to 1900. But nowhere have these experiments in the Electronic Baroque been fiercer than in Las Vegas and Los Angeles. These two cities become our laboratory (not much of a compliment, more like the victim of a plague that people want to catch).

From 1989 to 1993, it looked very doleful. Corporate downsizing seemed to be spreading to entire countries and cities as well. Southern California went through its worst downturn since the 1930s. One biblical affliction followed another: real estate depression; colossal scandals in policing and public education; the largest urban disturbance of the era in the United States; the most expensive earthquake in American history; the worst fires in half a century; more whites leaving than arriving for the first time in its history.

By contrast, Las Vegas had been preparing since the late eighties. By 1988, planners in the gaming industry knew that over forty American states would legalize gambling. There was no time to lose. A new resort image had to be put in place. Vegas had been in a financial slump. However, in 1989, just as the Wall went down, that started to turn around. Entrepreneur Steve Wynn opened the Mirage Hotel, costing nearly a billion dollars—including a working volcano and an upscale variation of gaudy, new to Vegas. The Mirage became the flagship for the Baroque on the Strip. It inspired the flourish of new "pedestrian friendly" venues in 1992–1996—Caesar's Forum, the new MGM Grand, Luxor, Treasure Island, New York/New York. Tens of millions of new tourists were added. By 1997, 52 percent of all Vegas revenues came from the resorts themselves, rather than from gambling.

In 1998, I told Jon Jerde, the architect of Wynn's even grander Bellaggio Hotel, that he was a master of the Electronic Baroque. Then Jerde told Wynn, who officially announced to the New York Times that indeed, the new Vegas was Baroque; and that Jerde was its Bernini (Jerde preferred to think of himself as its Borromini).[17] Thus, the newspaper of record officially declared the Baroque era underway.

But that era was already ending in Vegas before 9/11; even while the recovery in L.A.—1995—kept some rolling for a while after: in media mega-mergers, e-commerce, a real estate boom that began on the west side; and the Getty as

its new fussy escorial. The scale of entertainment had finally—and institutionally—gone global, even in Las Vegas, and could rival the piazzas of the Baroque.

Then, signals of a shift: In the spring of 2000, Steve Wynn agreed to sell all his casino interests to the MGM Group (even much of his "fabled" art collection). The last of the Medici-style freewheelers would no longer dominate what comes next. And that ran parallel to the decline of Silicon Valley as well. The presumed "anarchy" of the early Internet—before 1996—steadily hardened, spammified.

The industrialization of desire that began in 1955–1956 had matured at last. This primitive accumulation of entertainment capital took nearly fifty years. It finally reached an institutional takeoff after 1993, and showed its fangs particularly after 2000. And now the Electronic Baroque assumes an imperial demeanor that rivals the Roman Empire—but without an emperor (one hopes), perhaps even without a Rome. The privatized mall was now increasingly the public street, certainly in Los Angeles, with the growth of outdoor-themed shopping spaces like the Third Street Promenade, CityWalk, Old Pasadena, Media-City Burbank, the Grove. And in Las Vegas as well, with the lowest ratio of public parks and space per capita of any major city in the U.S.

On the Strip (officially renamed Las Vegas Boulevard), many sidewalks adjoining casinos were sold to business. Unlike downtown Vegas, there was essentially no public life in the old industrial urban sense. Of course, a new Guggenheim addition in Vegas was designed (planned by Rem Koolhaas); then was defunded in 2003. This museum annex was supposed to rival New York or Europe. Instead, it only miniaturized them further.

Presumably museums—as well as universities—were being rescripted to serve as indoor malls. They were to commemorate the cities that were gone, like a cultural casino. After all, during the boom, museum attendance rose.

Museums would map the transition toward this new Baroque. The new Guggenheim in Las Vegas was part of a franchise that has stopped growing in the U.S. They joined Guggenheims in Bilbao, Venice, Paris, Berlin (now closed) and Abu Dhabi. Very likely, shows will look more like Baroque *wunderkammers* than they used to. They will overlap and sprawl more, like browsers and search engines. The pressures to make shows monumentalize new global power relations will be intense, and with glossier facades and less within, like the Electronic Baroque: gaudy outside, conservative at its core.

What will the poetics of these monuments be, at gaudier museums, at Vegas? And what erasures, evasions—what history of forgetting—will these monuments bring?

Happy Imprisonment: Slot Machines and the Labyrinth Effect

A visitor writes about getting lost in the Caesar's Palace casino—every time he goes. But it is fun getting lost, "a challenge." Also, you always find your way out eventually "Wish me luck for the next Xtreme Adventure at Caesar's I attempt to take."[18]

This is Happy Imprisonment, a labyrinth effect, standard issue at most casinos. You have infinite choice, but seemingly no way out. It is essential as well in mega-malls, even in video games, and on the Internet. With each new generation of micro-software, labyrinths become even more "ergonomic." Entrances and exits become even more thrillingly inscrutable, with good digital sound, slot machines humming blissfully, as if you were inside a whale. Perhaps this reflects our growing social and economic inequality.

Slot machines earn upwards of 70 percent of all gaming profits, and are possibly the most multiplied use of digital software in the entire entertainment economy.[19] Apparently, the microchips set the winners, while sending out feedback to many sources at once. They have a statistical control package[20] for casino owners to make a count, with Palm Pilots for employees on the floor, wireless tracking of financial records for the desk, polling for the slot club, and for many casinos at once. Since many casino owners expected a slowdown by 2002, slots needed "killer software in an era of slower growth."[21] That meant more reward action games built in, a trend pioneered by Odyssey slots in the early nineties—a "game within a game" bonus features[22] carefully hidden; and "pick-a-game" (multi-game) choices—up to twelve choices, from keno to poker to various slot games—all on a single machine, like a remote-control programmer for gamblers.

Since the mid-nineties, video-based slots have taken over. Video backgrounds have become far more elaborate. Odyssey[23] led the pack in fancy backgrounds; then Odyssey was purchased by the world's largest slot maker, International Game Technology (IGT). Slots increasingly copy movie special effects, television laugh meters and applause, and aureoles that resemble the facades of casinos. They have animated pirate raids, showboats, magic wands, palm readers, fortune-tellers, even "realistic" showgirls giving you the come

on.[24] But for industry insiders, the biggest change in slots came in 1993, when IGT introduced the very successful "Wheel of Fortune," based on the TV quiz show. Now a third of slot machines require media licensing, particularly quiz shows (Regis Philbin and Alex Trebek are slot stars), or flashy movie blockbusters or cartoon favorites, from Popeye to the Hulk, Indiana Jones, Spider-Man.[25]

TV memorabilia are blinking everywhere on the slot floor. New laws prohibit children from watching TV on slot machines. In 2001, Arnold Schwarzenegger sued IGT for $20 million, after they apparently copied his voice and likeness for their Terminator game.[26] Meanwhile, IGT had a record first quarter in 2003, profits up over 20 percent, even while Vegas weakened. It is an inverse system; when gambling slows, casinos invest more in slots for "snowbirds"[27] and "drive-ins." But when casino profits rise, slot sales may dampen in Nevada, but improve for casinos in California,[28] or even in Poland. Still, on average, in Nevada alone, gamblers lose upwards of $500 million a month.[29] And at Indian casinos nationwide, the monthly profits range at nearly $5 million.[30]

Contributing to this massive growth, computer game designers, like Al Acron, the codeveloper of *Pong*, have worked regularly for slot companies since the eighties.[31] He and others have evolved an interactive story grammar for slots.[32] First, visuals on the screen highlight the jackpot. Then the player senses an internal design—the "math" or payback. But something in the design of this "math" still has to imply "the illusion of luck," "that there is a chance event occurring." As casino patriarch Benny Simon used to say: "Give a gambler a good excuse, they'll thank you for doing that."[33]

But most of all, slot machines are the ultimate special-effect toy, very much a composite of the past three hundred years. They were born in the same year as cinema, 1895. Their inventor, Charlie Fey of San Francisco, was very much a late-Baroque instrument maker. Their inner workings resemble old multi-task calculators, similar to gizmos from Leibniz's era (and imagined by Leibniz himself); or arithmometers (1680–1830). Or Baroque automatons and clockworks—levers and cams.

And they ushered in the industrial era for entertainment, were mass produced by ever larger companies after 1906. Fey's machines could just as easily dispense a cigar as money. In fact, early food dispensers were called slot machines. But these slots delivered the indeterminate. You were supposed to *rarely* get the cigar.[34] They turned *risk* into a consumer thrill—a labyrinth.

Then they became the most integrated software network in entertainment, practically a metonym for the globalized electronic economy. They stand in for cybernetic controls across many markets at once. Today computerized full-service tracking services perform like a bot for the house: tracking players, slots, tables, revenue sources, demographics, doing the taxes, providing "up to the minute WIN reporting," player photos, electronic signature identification, messages for players on screens in their hotel rooms. And for the trackers on the casino floor, there are portable handheld tracking devices; for their bosses, multiple casino access.[35] In 2002, MGM started its online casino,[36] to compete with hundreds of others,[37]led by IGT, Anchor, Shuffle Master, Viad.[38]

Slots are indeed a software chimera, the tail of a serpent attached to the head of a lion. Each slot combines business graphics with the Internet, cinematic memory, remote-control systems—and banking, franchise capitalism at your fingertips. The chimerical screen merges horizontally all the industries that pay for the play on the Strip, as well as casinos across the United States. Even many Indian casinos from Cherokee, North Carolina to Deadwood, South Dakota,"[39] however far off the main road, are wired to global electronic mailboxes, as well as Internet casinos spamming the Web. In the era of the Palm Pilot, as the computer monitor spawns in miniature, as genetic technology spawns, the monuments will shrink. Eventually they may be able to inject a slot machine under your skin.

Immersion: Shrinking into the Movie

We await the sea battle at Buccaneer Island in front of Treasure Island, for the pirates to sink the British frigate one more time. The entire site has been designed around a scenario, like a nineteenth-century panorama[40] of a great sea battle, or even a scripted walk through the Alps. The "story" centers around a mythical Portuguese island in the Caribbean. The island is conquered by the Spanish, then falls to pirates. "That way," explained designer Charles White, we could rationalize a lot of Middle Eastern attitude and Moroccan influence."

That story twist might please the Arab high rollers (before 9/11, not likely today), catch another submarket. But most of all, plot points in the back story, like back story in movie scripts helped designers fill in atmospheric details. Pieces of imaginary shipwrecks turn into pirate lairs. The stern of a pirate wreck clings to the hillside as if from a giant packhorse.

Bellagio had quite a back story, very much like a movie, about a fictional Italian immigrant, the son of chefs, who settles in Las Vegas earlier in the century, then gradually builds a fantasy version of his place of birth, even starts collecting Impressionist art. Bellagio is imagined, therefore, as eighty years old; it simulates a prehistory to a Las Vegas that never was. The integration of cinema and scripted spaces is complete, only in this case, you the spectator are inside the movie—in the masque. The foreground disappears. You disappear, as if you were a miniature yourself.

Condensed Cities

Through Baroque devices (trompe l'oeil, accelerated perspective, anamorphosis, multiple vanishing points), cities can be shrunk to the scale of a hundred acres or less. Bally's Paris is less than twenty acres, across the street from Lake Como, down the block from Venice (the Venetian), near Rome and New York. Obviously, these are "condensed" spaces, but not simply because the Chrysler Building is foreshortened against the Empire State Building. They are condensed like a cross between Hitchcock and PR maestro Edward Bernays (Freuds nephew). Overlapping narratives distract each other within the same space, into a comforting vertigo.

During the short boom of 1999, there were rumors that a Vegas/Vegas hotel was to be built. The entire Strip would be condensed to $\frac{3}{4}$ scale, like Disneyland's Main Street at $\frac{7}{8}$ scale; or to copy the very popular Universal CityWalk, that five years earlier had launched the next stage of the Electronic Baroque in L.A. This Vegas/Vegas would resemble movie sets built for Hollywood studios back in the twenties. Even today, the five-cities-in-one Paramount streets really explode with Baroque trickery (trompe l'oeil., etc.). But the movie camera subsumes all that visual noise. It digitally converts all Baroque clatter into a smooth, intriguing shot. Baroque Artifice is switched on—as industrial panorama. However, both illusions—1650 versus 2003—achieve a similar result in one respect. They shrink-wrap a street. They both condense in order to make the story more legible. Either way, they help us become tourists inside our own city. Spatial illusion jumps from real walls to our digital screens. This poetics of archiminiaturization remains crucial to the Electronic Baroque. It hardly matters what the screen turns into.

Architainment

That is the term used in Vegas to describe the new pedestrian-friendly look along the Strip. Eye candy on the facades, "a radioactive Manhattan"[41] replaced the old neon. Very systematically, sixties logo-like iconography at the Stardust, the Dunes, the Aladdin was imploded.[42] By 1997, their neon modernism was practically gone, along with seedy memories of lounge acts, icy showgirls, and gangsters behind the scene. Corporate Vegas was marketed more as a "family resort destination." It became the corporate headquarters for gaming around the world, with massive alliances between cinema, retail and tourism on a scale never possible before the nineties. Architainment was a coming-of-age, a grammar for a new political civilization.

We are witnessing monument building, inside scripted spaces that certainly remind us of the Baroque, even down to the fireworks and follies. But what is the paradox in that sort of monument—in Vegas architainment? Most monuments were designed specifically to hide the corruptions of their age. Indeed, we face a bumper crop of corruptions to work on over the next decade.

Monumental Miniatures

The condensed city in Vegas is mechanized feedback with controls, a slot machine opened out into a nineteenth-century panorama. But the script must somehow give this control a certain innocence. Architainment may rigidly set the path for gamblers, but the excuse is that this path operates like a movie. You obey like an audience while you walk through. The views echo camera angles you've seen in movies, a pan of the city during the opening credits. Then the shell of the building becomes a puzzle, a trompe l'oeil beneath the false skyline of NewYork/New York. The faux skyline turns out to be a huge skull supporting antlers, a comic unity, a world under control, like a Fleischer cartoon of Manhattan. The casino inside this skull turns into another outdoors, into streets, not rooms—a control within a control. Manhattan is shrunken down for you—niche after niche—abbreviated, accessible; and always air-cooled. You walk through Greenwich Village on a hot (now air-conditioned) day fifty years ago. You make your choice, a happy prisoner.

What do condensed cities reveal about franchise capitalism in the Electronic Baroque era? They mix elements from practically all the businesses who share in this Baroque-tourism, cinema, and the fixed perspectives provided by

the automobile. NewYork/New York is a composite of how it might feel inside a car on the Staten Island Ferry, as the skyline pulls in; or perhaps a road trip taking an hour or so on a Sunday in Manhattan. We walk through what the display across a windshield might show us.

What do condensed cities say about the context of urban life today? They monumentalize collective misremembering—the death of cities as we have known them, much the way Disneyland Main Street in 1955 helped guests remember that small towns were dying. It pays homage to dying species as well, oddly poignant, like the jungle shop for extinct animals inside the MGM Grand, with its animatronic replacements for animals that will soon be irreplaceable. The city becomes a petting zoo, a backdrop for photographs; or a botanical garden for a landscape of rare plants. It is a cheerful funeral, if possible out of scale, foreshortened to add grandeur. The Eiffel Tower is so close to the street, it seems to bump you off the curb, as does the Empire State Chrysler Building. The vertigo of the skyscraper is enhanced, even if the buildings are half scale.

Wherever possible, no matter how condensed, Vegas monuments still have to suggest scale; like Baroque theaters, they use forced perspective: a condensed but massive Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas, or Statue of Liberty. Vegas cities are like epic beach resorts, not a Japanese contemplative garden (though Japanese theme parks certainly rival those in the US.). The Eiffel Tower will loom directly against the street, as does the Statue of Liberty. So too, Lake Como (nine acres at Bellagio) is 4809 feet from the pirate village along Treasure Island. Distances get rubbery, foreshortened, to look even more massive. The Coke bottle that dominates the Coca-Cola sim-museum hugs the street like a vendor hawking soda pop at a county fair. I am reminded of theatrical machines that relied on foreshortening in seventeenth-century Europe, of the vast tradition of forced perspective and optical tricks that peaked essentially with the Baroque.

Instead of the industrial nation-state represented by Manhattan in 1920, the nineties gloried in retail, franchise capitalism, where entertainment and investment merged as real estate, urban planning, global ad campaigns, global licensing. The Vegas of the Steve Wynn era was imperial Electronic Baroque—the city-state, with baronial palaces with stylized moats and drawbridges. The public approached only with permission.

There was a profound sense in all Vegas promotion that Vegas condensed cities were palace jewels. They were Versailles for the multitude. But let us never imagine that palaces were democratic sites. I do not care deeply whether the

old cities return, much as I love them, and grew up in slummy New York. I am more concerned that we lose our urban *political* heritage. As a culture, we are being asked to freely dispose of our First and Second Amendment rights for a good cup of latte, and a chance to walk past architainment. To repeat for emphasis—these are ducal domains, cities for public ritual, but not for "democratic ways," the old expression from Louis Sullivan and the late nineteenth century.

And these ergonomically restricted spaces will grow more comfortably restricted as the decades wear on. But ours is a much more class-driven culture. Steadily, institutions like genteel casinos are emerging to give us rituals to celebrate the new restrictions. Do not be fooled by the mix of classes and races who walk along the Strip. Crowds are not by definition a symbol of democracy. Crowds of that sort used to honor the birthday of the baron as well.

We must not confuse happy imprisonment with political freedom. In the nineties, to shop and gamble freely was now the bulwark of the republic, with monuments like architainment. But monuments are not crimes. They merely announce who is in charge of our public memory.

Snow Globes: Collective Misremembering

Who owns public memory? That became the problem for Tri-M Inc., the initial developer of New York/ New York. In 1996, Tri-M was sued for allegedly infringing upon another design that portrayed yet another version of New York's skyline. That "other" design was for a New York—themed shopping center' (never built). It also integrated the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, and the Brooklyn Bridge. A judge had to decide who indeed owned the false memory of New York as a condensed city.

Various litigations dragged on until 2002, along with the legalese. The plaintiff argued that it held the exclusive right to use the Manhattan skyline to express the theme of New York City; at least in the kind of structure for the kind of resort that MGM Grand, Inc., and Primadonna Resorts were building, namely New York/New York. The plaintiff brought action to protect what it perceived to be its intellectual property. In reply, Tri-M argued that this idea belonged to the public domain. I would argue that the plaintiff wanted a piece of the action, particularly the deep pockets of MGM Grand.

Dave Bailey, the expert witness on the Tri-M team, searched for ephemera where New York's skyline was put on key chains, postcards, T-shirts. He went

back at least sixty years, even to Tom Nast cartoons from the 1870s, to the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883.

In the end, "a particular kind" of evidence seemed the most convincing. He found a few souvenir snow globes of the New York skyline. The crude plastic skyscrapers inside the snow globes clearly resembled the assortment at New York/New York. "Other telling bits of kitsch included a gaudy ashtray featuring the NYC skyline, and a Statue of Liberty souvenir thermometer."[43] An intermediary sketch for Tri-M "portrayed" Liberty "as a giant souvenir thermometer."

The judge threw the copyright claim out of federal court on summary judgment. Then, the Nevada State Court eventually dismissed the "trade secret" on summary judgment as well. The wheels of justice barely turned. Tri-M received two awards for the costs of defending itself. Finally, in 2002, in the midst of countersuits and legal malpractice suits, the plaintiff's remaining cairn, "breach of contract," was settled. All cases were now closed.

In a sense, New York/ New York was "legally" no longer a condensed Manhattan. Nor was it a movie set (that would have been a different suit altogether). It was essentially a souvenir of the kind that you dropped in your beach bag but now ballooned out into a monument the size of a casino/hotel. It stood in memoriam to tourists not quite remembering which building went where. It was a monument to condensed memorabilia. It was built as a social imaginary of a social imaginary.

Dave Bailey explains (2003):[44]

> It was creating a New York people could recognize based on previous New Yorks they had seen. Many of the designers on both sides had never been to New York. Their primary sources were library books and travel guides. From the get-go, they were recuperating the distributed imagery of New York, rather than translating directly from the city itself. The map largely determines the terrain, so designers started directly from preexisting maps.
>
> That's the way Vegas has to work. It plays on instant recognizability: A lot of people haven't been to New York, but almost everyone knows its iconic image. It is more important that New York look like the familiar map of the city than the city itself. It presupposes and plays with the touristic sublimation and condensation of the city.

2003: To market the lingering memory of 9/11, billboards in L.A. advertise New York/New York as "Lower Manhattan."

1999: Zones of Unknowing

In 1999, just beyond New York/New York, the visitor entered a zone of unknowing. The sidewalk was as gritty and nondescript as the industrial edge of Puebla, Mexico. These gritty patches are important clues. In Puebla, factories and body shops encircle the Baroque city center, grim re-minders of a colonial tradition still in force. Wealth is shipped away, leaving zones of unknowing next to a glamorous eighteenth-century *zócalo* and Belle Epoque department stores. Vegas is also part of a colonial tradition, the American West, where mining companies and now gaming corporations ship profits out of state, leaving rough patches just beyond the glamour.

Indeed, the grander the illusion, the more dysfunction that it hides. Otherwise, why try so hard? As part of my eccentric research on scripted spaces, I have been walking through (and clicking or sitting through) every special-effects environment I could find, from action "ride" movies to video games, tours of effects houses—or studying the Ringstrasse in Vienna, the *zócalo* Puebla. In each of these, I have spotted zones of unknowing like the rubble along the Vegas Strip. The grit in these lost patches was easier to "read" than the finished product only meters away. The seam indicated where the process was uneven, that despite all the enchantment, this economy was continually in drift. On the surface, back at New York/New York, there is order—the themed space, the sparkling gimmicks. But beneath that order is a neurotic struggle to industrialize desire. After all, what is a gambler's Impulse"? It is a fractionalized turn of the head—so brief, but so essential, that it can be maddening to locate, more a game of chance than gambling itself. With a slot machine at least, the house knows the odds. But to guess which casino will receive the impulse—that problem is subtle enough to be unsettling.[45]

Of course, these seams do not remain for long. By 2000, this zone of unknowing had been cleaned up. But they are a useful reminder, that while the Strip has "lively pedestrian and sidewalk life,"[46] it labors under vast contradictions. In 1995, the sidewalks around Treasure Island were released, quit-claim, to Mirage Corporation. When asked why privatize the sidewalks, Steve Wynn replied: "That's the way I designed it."[47] But does that turn walkable Vegas into an iron lung, with oxygen pumping in the casinos? Presumably, just beyond the iron lung, more zones of unknowing threaten at the boundaries: gangsters, bad losers, hunters and gatherers; loose slots. Vegas makes calculated risk exciting.

Junking it up

The occasional desert rubble—zone of unknowing—is a nostalgic moment for the Strip. It reminds us that Las Vegas was a railroad crosswalk as late as 1930. But it also suggests that zones of unknowing are planned—cheat codes as part of the script, along with fake rubble, to suggest that the casino is an "unfinishable object."

In Reno, for example, I interviewed an architect who works on the Eldorado, a simulation of the Gold Rush panning for loose silver. The eye candy there is gargantuan: huge mining machines in the center; even Bernini's Triton Fountain oversized in the corner. Gigantism is fundamental to the casino presence. By contrast, near the restaurants, I found a curious schism, even for casino architecture. A very expensive Victorian cherrywood saloon/tearoom was positioned directly alongside one of the most primitive murals I have ever seen. The architect told me that this is a common practice, called "junking up," to leave patches, to suggest that the casino was not quite finished. They want the guest to assume that the odds are not finished either.

Noir Naïfs

Thus, despite what seems obvious to the eye, we must not turn into "Noir Naïfs" while researching casinos. A noir, Manichaean search for evil will obscure more than it reveals. I am a terrible noir naïf when I visit Vegas. For example, as a classic case of naive research, I decided to "look" wrong at the San Remo, to see if I could force a clue about how surveillance operated (to pass the time while a friend went to the bathroom). It seemed easy enough to stand out. That weekend was dominated by hordes of Japanese and Puerto Rican tourists. I tried to stare oddly at the craps table. The lady pit boss, who looked as if she had just overhauled a truck, eyed me strangely. So I kept "standing" out even more, thinking she would cue the security people. Later, I was told that she was simply trying to guess when I would get to the tables. She didn't think I was counting anything, could see through me in seconds. My fantasies outran any good sense. That can happen so easily. I often warn students: Evil never wears a black hat. It comps you a room, offers you a $6.95 buffet. It is homespun, very ergonomic, easy-listening, user friendly. It is in the business of never showing its dark side, of giving you a good nine cents on every dime.

In the 1984 Security Manual for Caesar's Palace, staff are advised on how to handle a guest who has tripped on the casino floor. Polaroids must be taken, while the guest is shunted to a cab or an ambulance. "Be courteous, do not argue." However, "do not advise injured guests that the hotel will assume payment of any medical expense." Also, "do not mention insurance or insurance adjusters," or "defects in the premises."[48] This is standard practice at casinos and malls throughout the US. Release just enough information—smile—but never too much. Camouflage crucial details; make these controls almost impossible to spot.

Immersion

The walk from porte cochère directly into the casino itself is a rather complicated immersion. To englobe the space, ceilings might be interrupted like film cuts by parabolic shapes: curved hanging objects, animatronic trickery; shadow boxes of pirate treasure; overhanging faux shrubbery.

Further in, lighting and ceiling height affect the gambler's mood, the sense of timeless day into night, but also the sense of privacy. More intimate slot machines tend to require lower ceilings. The card tables are higher, more public, with a nostalgic low-hanging light fixture occasionally, harking back to the old sawdust joints many decades ago.

The separations between gaming tables, slot machines and sports gaming are obsessively worked out. Hotel and food breaks are shoehorned (finessed) nearby. Among casino designers, there is ongoing debate as to how theming and gambling should be merged or isolated—first to keep proletarian trade; and second for the more upscale types. Does the main room need to feature the blackjack tables or diminish them?

Every twenty feet or so, there should be quick edits, fixed-point perspectives, moments to stop: flashes of trompe l'oeil[49] (expensive copies in unusual materials); video walls; display cases near the ceiling. Fixed-point illusion provides boundaries where needed; yet makes the guest feel like an insider, "in the know."

Thus, casino architects often draw from Baroque and Renaissance trompe l'oeil. For example, Jon Jerde's designs for Bellagio, even for the Fremont Experience, refer to sixteenth-century Italian illusionistic architecture.[50] Often, the effects are modeled on Disney imagineering as immersion, particularly the Pirates of the Caribbean (designed by Marc Davis in 1964), the point of origin

for theme-park immersive spaces In Orlando as wel1.[51] Cine immersion puts you inside a movie shoot. It relies on sculptural compositing, like blue-screen and digital trickery, or layers of Baroque theater wings.

Nowadays, this immersion stops short of overt racist clichés or insults about service workers. Las Vegas is very much a capital of union activism, particularly the Culinary Workers Union. It has massive Latino and black communities. It has sprawled practically down to the Hoover Dam, down to Henderson. Clark County is mired in pollution, massive traffic jams, water wars, and complex politics left over from mining, a sense of colonization by foreign investors. Finally, the state of Nevada was founded by Mormons. The religious contrasts are staggering. So, on the Strip, quasi-Protestants have theocratically blended with quasi-Catholics. Their Christian alliance makes certain to not collide with other faiths. Religious crusades barely overlap, like two species breathing different air. The same is true of "feminine" industries. Filmmaker Arnie Willa writes:[52]

> It's the "mother of all strips," according to Robert Venturi, who's been learning a lot from Las Vegas ever since.[53] You can run but you can't hide, mother will haunt you. She literally and figuratively cuts the town in two. Not to mention what she does to women's bodies. All those maids bending, those waitresses serving, those clusters of women standing on street corners. Rosalyn, who runs the Friendship Corner, as a shelter for the homeless, wonders out loud: "If all women stopped doing the work in this town, what would happen?"