



1 Santa Barbara

I had been thinking about Las Vegas and its famous signs for a while when, this past summer, two friends asked me and my girlfriend to travel there with them. They were planning to get married by an Elvis impersonator at one of the city's wedding chapels, and wanted us as their witnesses.

I had been thinking about the signs of Las Vegas because of the book I had just finished writing: a book about eighteenth-century French architecture culture, of all things. The book examined architecture's place within the constellation of changes that transformed the public sphere in eighteenth-century France, including the growing reach of government bureaucracies, the expansion of integrated commodities markets, and especially the accelerated development of print culture and reading publics. In studying how these changes helped generate a new, spatially abstracted understanding of publicity, the relationship of architecture to different forms of public text had emerged as a major theme. I had discovered that, as the public sphere came to be identified with the circulation of printed textual matter more than with embodied experiences in real space, architectural writers and social commentators had become anxious about what suddenly seemed the incomprehensibility of the architectural environment. Critics began wondering why architects continued to insist on the arcane language of classicism, which so few people understood; theorists became obsessed with the importance of rendering architectural «character» more legibly; some architects began reluctantly publishing third-person reviews of their own work, in the effort to give them a kind of publicity and clarity that the buildings themselves no longer seemed capable of attaining; other architects tried to develop a new formal language that, through severity or bold contrasts or immense scale, would give architecture a public legibility commensurate with that of text. All to little avail: by 1780 the critic Jean-François Viel de Saint-Maux, who blamed the printing press for destroying the communal cohesion required for meaningful architecture, bitterly mourned that buildings had become so formally inexpressive that they practically required painted signs on them that read, «Here is such-and-such a thing.»¹

«Here is such-and-such a thing» is, of course, *the* architectural mode of Las Vegas. It is a city where, as Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Stephen Izenour wrote in 1972, the sign is a «vulgar extravaganza» and the building standing beneath it is «a modest necessity.»² It is the city whose center – the Strip – was famously described by cultural critic Tom Wolfe in 1965 as an «electric-sign gauntlet [...] where the neon and the par lamps – bubbling, spiraling, rocketing, and exploding in sunbursts ten stories high out in the middle of the desert – celebrate one-story casinos.»³ It is a city whose most recognizable icon is itself a



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sign, the famous 1959 «Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas Nevada» sign on Las Vegas Boulevard. This was the source of my interest in the place: Las Vegas seemed to offer the perfect actualization of Viel de Saint-Maux's despairing vision of the architectural horizons of our fragmented, decentered modern age.

I also had one other reason for being interested: I happen to live and work in Santa Barbara, California, a hyper-manicured coastal playground for the wealthy that is famous, among other things, for the highly restrictive regulations governing the placement, size, colors, materials, mobility, illumination, and even the typefaces of its public signage. From an urban point of view, Santa Barbara would be regarded by most Americans as the polar opposite of Las Vegas. The homogeneous Santa Barbara downtown is characterized by the Spanish Mission Revival style of architecture, which the city fathers had mandated in their plans for the city's reconstruction following a catastrophic earthquake in 1925 (Figs. 1 and 2). The title of their master plan – «A Town in Spain» – concisely sums up their genteel ambition. The town's current Municipal Code polices this homogeneity, most famously in its regulations concerning signage. In an effort to prevent «excessive competition for [citizens'] visual attention» and to «protect and enhance the City's historic and residential character and its economic base,» public signs are permitted to do no more than «identify» their associated enterprises, and are required to «harmonize with their associated building, the neighborhood and other signs in the area.»⁴

Naturally, Santa Barbara has come in for its share of mockery for the officially tasteful atmosphere it rather spectacularly achieves through such regulation. A locally notorious example came in May 2000, when an English professor and critic called Dave Hickey, from the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, published a blistering essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled, «A World Like Santa Barbara.»⁵ Hickey had spent a semester as guest professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara (my university), and though he liked the students, he had been «troubled» by the «perfect contentment and uncanny coherence» of the town:

[A]daptive behavior was unnecessary. Everything was regulated and explained. Urbanity, anxiety, otherness, contention, loud colors, and bright talk were wholly absent. Even shopping (that quintessential urban activity) was conducted as a form of relentless grazing administered by tastefully regulated signage [...] civilization, in this rubric, was defined as a bucolic quietude prefiguring the silence of the grave.

Hickey went so far as to present Santa Barbara as the dystopia towards which all of America was sliding as a result of its provincial distaste for any form of culture other than a safely commodified one. Arguing that genuine art and letters were supposed to help us adapt to the discomforts and anxieties of urban, cosmopolitan life, he claimed that the antiseptic public culture of Santa Barbara was instead geared towards the spiritually deadening goal of *alleviating* those anxieties. That such a critique should come from a resident of the very heart of darkness – Las Vegas – only made it the more provocative.

And so, my girlfriend and I hopped in the car and drove to Las Vegas to meet our friends: a five-hour voyage from Santa Barbara that ran down the coast, then shot inland through the ragged industrial outskirts of northern and eastern LA, on through the Mojave Desert, and finally into Las Vegas and to our hotel on the Strip. In cultural terms, we would be starting out in a place where minute regulation had created an architectural Eden where the rich tended their clear conscience amid an illusion of pre-capitalist public coherence; and we were ending in a place where the refractory tendencies of capitalist modernity had generated a public domain so brutally alienating that it had extinguished the poetry of architecture altogether, leaving only the reductive explicitness of public text with any chance of communicating with authority in the public domain.

That, at least, was the narrative in my head. But what became immediately apparent upon arrival was how off-base these expectations were. Obviously I knew that the Strip had reinvented itself in the 1990s, with family-friendly luxury resort-casinos replacing the sleazier old-style gambling emporia; and that this new Las Vegas had been theorized endlessly as *the* great city of hyperreality and simulacra.⁶ But I confess that I hadn't quite realized that the old Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour analysis of the urban character of the Strip had become *completely irrelevant*. So, in case you hadn't heard: the Las Vegas Strip is no longer oriented towards automobiles at all; it is an entirely pedestrian experience. It even has that socialist European contrivance, a public transport monorail. The vast parking lots visible in front of the casinos in old photos – «a symbol as well as a convenience» according to Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour – are all gone, replaced by enlarged casino buildings, palm trees, and fountains on the scale of Versailles. (Hotel guests now stash their cars in parking garages hidden out of sight far at the back.) But what shocked me and, I confess, disappointed me the most was that nearly all of those flamboyant signs I had read about are also gone.⁷ Most of the casino-hotels now carry their names near the tops of their high-rise towers, in the manner of a corporate headquarters. The visitor to Las Vegas no longer spends his time motoring along, negotiating multiple assaults on his attention from enormous flashing signs. Instead, he lurches along a claustrophobic sidewalk, fending off obscene-joke T-shirts, MOSCHINO belt buckles, Arkansas Razorbacks sun visors, GUCCI sunglasses, and «Old Fart» baseball caps – to say nothing of the countless phone-contact cards being handed out to advertise the services of naked women named Tanya or Kaiko or Bobbi. Hundreds of these slithered underfoot day and night.



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When you lift your eyes a few feet above this overheated carnival to regard your surroundings, you begin to realize that the polarity identified by Venturi et al (sign = extravaganza; building = modest necessity) has been precisely reversed. This is now a landscape of architectural signs. Virtually every monument that a television-watching citizen of the world might be expected to recognize is present on the Strip: the Great Pyramid, the Sphinx, the Empire State Building, the Eiffel Tower, the Trevi Fountain, the Doge's Palace. All the major new casino-resorts have a place-based theme. Caesar's Palace, the granddaddy of Las Vegas Casinos, has a generalized ancient Roman theme, with cement statuary and columns and, in its vast shopping mall, a remarkable glass-walled mini-Pantheon on which Hadrian's generous inscription now says FENDI (Fig. 3). Down the road, there's New York, New York, with its exterior recreations of the Chrysler building, Grant's tomb, the Brooklyn Bridge, and so forth, with a shopping mall of stage-set New York streets inside. The Paris Resort and Casino stands amid reduced scale replicas of the Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel Tower, the Garnier Opéra, and much more, while the main casino floor is made to resemble Les Halles, with a shopping mall of quaint Parisian streets filtering off behind (Fig. 4). The Venetian's façade reproduces that of the Doge's Palace and is entered via a version of the Bridge of Sighs. Within is yet another shopping mall, laid out amid winding alleys and canals, all enclosed and air conditioned and covered by a remarkable coved ceiling colored and lit to create a disturbingly believable sense of late-afternoon sky. The center of the Venetian's mall is a large piazza containing several restaurants where one dines, as it were, *al fresco*. Here one felt as though one had been vacuum-sealed inside a kind of antiseptic cartoon of



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Venice. Yet at times this place could seem very much like the real Venice; for instance, no one in earshot was speaking Italian. All the other diners were speaking English or Russian or Chinese or Dutch or German. (A costumed «gondolier» drifting along one of the indoor canals did rather generously say «Ciao bello» to me as he passed, but when I said «Parla italiano?» in reply, he looked embarrassed and poled off round the corner.) (Fig. 5)

At some point, as I hurried from Venice to Paris by way of New York, it occurred to me that the Strip and the putative «Town in Spain» where I lived weren't so dissimilar after all. Both places seemed oriented by some similar insights about the nature of textual versus architectural signs. Textual signs – especially in profusion – frankly admit the complexity of the environment by their strenuously explicit efforts to guide you; one can see this very clearly by looking at the old photos of the chaotic 1960s-era Strip in *Learning from Las Vegas*. This endless chaos of invitations to consumption, which one navigated via mechanized means with virtually no consciousness of one's body, presented the nearest thing to virtuality that embodied experience has to offer. In contrast to this textual landscape, a landscape of architectural signs has the power to elide that complexity by creating a public domain that seems rational and stable. This is after all what so many modern critics have mistrusted about architecture: its capacity to make what is disjointed and alienating seem as though it were ordered and just. The paradox of the new Las Vegas Strip – and what surprisingly reminded me of Santa Barbara – is that it implicitly acknowledges the limitations of textual legibility vis a vis phenomenal legibility. In a place that, more than any other, depends for its survival on its populations feeling uncritical and unwary,



5 Venice, Las Vegas

the central insight of the last quarter century has been to replace the semi-virtuality of a text-based, atomizing, automotive culture with an enclosed, pedestrian culture of legible architectural forms, in which public text is deliberately restrained.

To put it in the historical context mentioned above: When my eighteenth-century critics lamented the loss of a legible public domain, they were in part voicing anxiety about the disappearance of directly experienced, locally-based social worlds, and about the rise of an integrated world of socio-economic mobility; a world in which real space was forfeiting its position as the paradigmatic site for public life to the circulation of information and opinion in disembodied forms. In such a context, and in comparison with the suddenly normative public currency of printed text, architecture instantly came to seem illegible. The new Las Vegas Strip is weird and interesting because it dares to deny this historical logic. Recognizing that its old textual signs *reassured* you by helping you navigate, but simultaneously *distressed* you by reminding you of how much help you required, the Strip provides a distorted return of the old ideal of the architecturally legible public domain – one which, in its seeming naturalness (as opposed to the artificiality of text), offers a more complete reassurance.

What is more, the Strip does this for a public that is perhaps the most extreme imaginable iteration of the heterogeneous, incoherent public that so disturbed eighteenth-century writers: a global touristic public of thrill-seekers, drawn precisely by the promise of a special space-time uniquely for consumption, and that is completely sundered from the temporal and affective continuities of the place known as «home.» (Hence the Las Vegas Tourist Board's recent advertising slogan, «What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.») This public, at

once temporary and continuous, is assembled in a random spot literally in the middle of the desert, a «no place» assimilable only to the most brazenly consumerist notions of «utopia.» Could a more thoroughgoing burlesque of a community possibly be imagined? In such circumstances, who would dare to imagine that the phenomenological intimacy of architectural poesis might aspire to regain its old prerogative of supplying a communally legible environment?

The Strip solves this riddle with an architecture that refers not to the real buildings it purports to represent, but rather to the mediatized representations by which their names and images have become part of world consciousness. The only buildings represented here are those which everyone knows from childhood, through TV and books and films and advertisements; buildings that, even when one visits them in person, are impossible to experience on terms outside of those established by their ubiquitous representation in popular culture. In Rome, we see the Trevi Fountain and we remember *La Dolce Vita*; but whether or not we know that Anita Ekberg was actually standing on a stage-set at Cinecittà in that famous scene, it can be hard to know what, precisely, from our personal perspective, is so different about seeing the Trevi Fountain in a film, in an Alitalia advertisement, in Rome, on a tour of Cinecittà, or in Las Vegas. (The difficulty for Americans, in the current political climate, of viewing Egypt in this context-less way surely has much to do with why the Luxor Hotel recently announced that it was going to expunge the Egyptian theme from its establishment.)⁸ Thus a dematerialized, mediatized architectural «heritage» is here *re-materialized* – given substance so that visitors may have a kind of communal phenomenological experience of it; despite the fact that this «heritage» owed its original necessity to modernity's explosion of traditionally scaled spatial and communal experience.

And so it is with a peculiar logic that these cardboard mock-ups of famous buildings should find themselves lined up side by side in the middle of a perfect nowhere – for this nowhere provides them with the general virtues of real space (namely, phenomenological possibility), but without the socially refractory limitations that inevitably limit *specific* real spaces. These legible architectural images give one the uncanny sense, as though in a particularly vivid dream, of somehow walking and touching and smelling one's way through the representational fields of an internationally common consumer culture. This is the place that Las Vegas cannily uses architecture – not text – to make you feel safe in.

Notes

1 Richard Wittman, *Architecture, Print Culture, and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France*, London 2007.

2 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas the Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, rev. ed. Cambridge 1977, p. 13.

3 Tom Wolfe, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, New York 1965, p. 5.

4 City of Santa Barbara, Municipal Code, Chapter 22.70.010 (http://www.santabarbaraca.gov/Government/City_Hall/Municode/).

5 Dave Hickey, «A World Like Santa Barbara»,

in: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 26, 2000, p. B10 (<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v46/i38/38b01001.htm>).

6 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor 1994.

7 Two of the last, at the Stardust and the Frontier, have gone just this year. (http://www.jetcafe.org/npc/gambling/casino_death_watch.html#recent)

8 Howard Stutz, «Luxor's New Look: Farewell to Egypt», in: *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 12, 2007 (<http://www.lvrj.com/business/8451727.html>).