

# ARCHITECTURAL SOCIOLOGY AND POST-MODERN ARCHITECTURAL FORMS

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Architectural sociology examines how architectural forms are both the cause and effect of socio-cultural phenomena. As illustration of both but especially the former relationship, we could examine the role of architecture in the creation of contemporary Las Vegas, a city that has experienced almost unparalleled growth in residents (1.4 million) and tourists (35 million annually) since 1990 (GLS Research, 2000). Many have described Las Vegas as America's most postmodern city—one that is ever-changing and reinventing itself to new markets and cultural shifts, that is highly technological and communicative, that reflects mostly a superficial and mass media present society, and that dominates the senses (Baudrillard, 1994). Consider the following postmodern characteristics of Las Vegas and architecture's role in creating this image (Lyotard, 1984 and Jameson, 1991).

**1. Spectacle**—Las Vegas is thought of as an emporium of grandiose forms and ideas. Everything that is supposedly enjoyed and experienced can be

encountered on the grandest of scales in Las Vegas, including the New York Skyline, the great monuments of Paris, instantaneous escapes to Rio, the exotic lure of Asia at Mandalay Bay, the pyramids and mysteries of ancient Egypt, the Caesars, queens, and gladiators of ancient Rome, sinking pirate ships, remembrances of early Hollywood, and dueling Knights of the Roundtable. The belief is that anything that can be imagined can also be designed and accomplished in Las Vegas.

**2. Hyperreal**—The approach taken by the megaresorts is that of reproducing and enhancing an original idea to create impressive simulations with new technologies that result in an even better experience than the original. While the critics argue that such enticements entertain and seduce, they often have little risk of actually reflecting the original. Thus, the Venetian's canals in Las Vegas have been designed by architects and engineers to be climate and light controlled, to have properly chlorinated water, and to provide the best of Italian

opera as background music. Megaresort developers may well defend the attraction and genuinely ask why visit the real Venice if the recreated Venetian canals of Las Vegas are designed to be more pure and romantic.

**3. Thematization**—Las Vegas differs from what one can find in many other cities in that it presents not a single, solitary identity but, in fact, a fragmented identity. Las Vegas is a compressed and excessively stereotypical and romanticized version of many of the famous places of the world and representations throughout time. Given that so many of the world's most famous places have already been used for hotel themes, resort developer Steve Wynn has recently chosen name "The Reve," (a name borrowed from the Picasso painting and French for "the dream") as a far-reaching, dream-like identity to describe his soon-to-be-built \$1.63 billion hotel-resort. Architects are now faced with creating a physical environment that both reflects this theme of "imaginary place" and heightens the emotions of those who enter.

**4. Simulacra**—"Simulacra" are perfect representations of entities which do not exist; they are simulation processes that generate a "real" which lacks an origin or reality (Jameson, 1991 and Baudrillard, 1994: 2). Simulacra is an integral part of Las Vegas and often involves architectural forms, such as the megaresorts that have created an oasis in a desert with imported and non-indigenous trees and plants, the Excalibur Hotel's grand medieval arena where the Sir Lancelot drama unfolds nightly, and the Mirage Hotel's scaled-down volcano that erupts with constant and explosive regularity every hour on the hour. None of these representations have ever existed in nature or historically, yet these fantasies-made into realities are largely dependent on the effectiveness of architectural creations.

**5. Commodification**—Many have commented negatively on the image that virtually anything and everything in Las Vegas is for sale. Hedonistic and highly manipulated travelers to Las Vegas can move from place to place and have at their disposal gourmet restaurants, cheap buffets, nude dancers, Pavarotti, the Rolling Stones, Disneyland-like theme parks, Tiffany's, souvenir dice clocks, or Dali's finest art. Las Vegas offers a

multitude of fragmented activities and products in an attempt to appeal to any type of potential customer. Of course, architectural designs are created to promote profits as shown in casino pathways that are seldom straight and easy to navigate, but instead send would-be customers by slot machines, craps tables, and other gambling enticements, or as shown in tourist shops being located adjacent to casinos and hotel elevators where winnings can then be easily spent.

**6. Fragmentation**—The architectural design of resorts are such that envelop the visitor, temporarily, into a variety of fascinating, often insular, and sometimes mystical experiences. Each of the resorts attempts to offer a unique theme. As earlier noted, even the design of each resort is such as to lure the visitor into of the heart of the casino wherein one finds a maze of machines and table games. Some have argued that even casino carpet and ceilings, ugly by most standards, are done with intentionality so as to manipulate the visitor's senses from all else except for the games to be played. Each resort is designed to become a complete, uninterrupted, isolated, and other-worldly experience.

We can see that the postmodern image of Las Vegas is dependent on

the architecture that has been created to promote its most important industry.

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