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Kurt Kraler

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**CityCenter, Las Vegas:
'De-Theming' in the
Neoliberal City**

KURT KRALER

ERA Architects, Canada

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Abstract

The opening of CityCenter, Las Vegas in 2009 marked the single largest privately funded development in American history. The sprawling resort campus signalled a departure from all-encompassing themes of kitsch that had long defined the Las Vegas Strip, obfuscating the threshold between public and private. It is indicative of the broader push for deregulation and monopolization that are characteristic of neoliberal processes. This raises pertinent questions around the implications of the apparent 'de-theming' of these leisure environments and the wider normalization of neoliberal principles in architecture and urbanism. The seminal *Learning from Las Vegas* identified the merging of sign and building alongside the widespread adoption of neoliberal ideology, where the roadside sign advanced from "decorated shed" to "duck" to atmospheres and, eventually, urbanism. Employing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concepts of "de-territorialization" and "re-territorialization," this process of de-theming can be theorized as the reconfiguration of leisure as the totalizing image of gentrification and urban renewal.

Through an examination of the overlapping histories of organized crime, federal funding, migration, class struggle, and an entrenched regional military presence, Las Vegas can be understood as a city undergoing constant flux. The Las Vegas Neon Museum has become an important indexological catalogue of signage from lost buildings, attempting to preserve the collective memory of Las Vegas while reinforcing the prominence of the image within the American commercial vernacular.

Keywords

Deleuze, Gentrification and urban renewal, Las Vegas urbanism, Memory and historical erasure, Neoliberalism

Introduction

In 2009, the CityCenter resort on the Las Vegas Strip by MGM Resorts became the single largest privately funded development in American history. The \$9.2-billion, seven building resort campus includes several luxury hotels, a Daniel Libeskind-designed high-end retail mall, an extensive public art collection and two condominium towers, each set askew to offer prime views of the Strip. Its opening also marks a departure from all-encompassing themes of kitsch that had long defined the casino resorts of the Las Vegas Strip, instead employing signifiers of gentrification and a “sophisticated urban metropolis.” Promotional material for the project claimed that the development was “the world’s largest environmentally sustainable urban community” (Smith et al., 2014: 41). However, as Aseem Inam notes, the development fails to deliver on its touted claims of a “pedestrian focused urban plan” or “mixed-use programming” (Marshall, 2015). The project masquerades as a thriving metropolis while devoid of the basic programmatic mix of public and private spaces that comprise a self-sustaining city. With absentee condo owners and a dearth of basic services like schools or grocery stores, CityCenter is just another casino resort campus that caters solely to the leisure economy. In addition to other Las Vegas resorts like the pirate-themed Treasure Island resort, which rebranded itself to “T.I.,” and the Linq and Cosmopolitan, it is clear that ambiguous themes of generic urban sophistication and luxury are prevailing.

This analysis will begin with the proposal of “de-theming” as a term to trace this shift in themed spaces and highlight the mechanisms of neoliberal restructuring that operate through architecture and urbanism. To understand the genesis of the latest collection of sprawling resort campuses, it is crucial to review the progression of themed spaces in Las Vegas and the overlapping histories of organized crime, federal funding, class struggle, and an entrenched regional military presence. The process of monopolization that resulted would become recognized as a form of neoliberal restructuring. We will theorize and identify the continued normalization of neoliberal processes in Las Vegas and globalized cities that project the image of generic neoliberal urban centres. In particular, the de-theming of Las Vegas blatantly serves to further obfuscate the threshold between public and private and is indicative of the continued push for further deregulation and consolidation of ownership.

In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari position capitalism as the “radical decoding and deterritorialization of the material flows” that had previously been attributed to the earth (Smith, 2015). This deterritorialization of material flows is “immediately ‘reterritorialized’ onto the body of the despot, who assumes credit for all production” (Smith, 2015). Furthermore, deterritorialization describes the process where the “very basis of one’s identity...is eroded,” becoming-imperceptible, “ceasing to be perceived as different” (Buchanan 2005, 23). Ian Buchanan (2005) likens this to the process of “becoming” that one expects to encounter upon visiting a place with a pre-established identity. For instance, he considers the city of Paris where one is “deterritorialized” the more they “become” Parisian in their likeness for such clichés as croissants or berets. Deterritorialization conditions the subject to become imperceptible, just as in Las Vegas where the CityCenter development is an attempt to code a leisure resort as a “sophisticated urban metropolis,” signifying a departure from themes of kitsch that had long defined the region.

Acting in tandem with deterritorialization, Deleuze and Guattari also define “reterritorialization” as is anything that can “stand for’ the lost territory; one can reterritorialize on a being, an object, an apparatus or system...” (1987: 508, ellipsis in original). It is emphasized that reterritorialization should not be confused with “a return to a primitive or older territoriality: it necessarily implies a set of artifices by which one element, itself deterritorialized serves as a new territoriality for another, which has lost its territoriality as well” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 174). Deleuze and Guattari also emphasize that de- and re-territorialization are not binary, reciprocal or sequential. Several of the signifiers that CityCenter employs conjures images of a self-sufficient cosmopolitan city, reterritorializing the Strip property with a synthetic urbanity. The proposed “de-theming” encapsulates the simultaneous processes of de- and re-territorialization in relationship to the recognizable acts of gentrification and the minimization of discernable themed environments.

Historical Erasure through the Acceleration of Passage

The progression of themed spaces in Las Vegas has been linked to the acceleration of passage permitted by advances in modes of travel. From the railroad to the automobile and the jet plane, each installment would significantly alter the built environment. In his essay entitled *Space in the Age of Non-Place*, Ian Buchanan (2005) notes that the capacity to facilitate increased passage requires a smoothing of space, a uniquely postmodern phenomenon:

If it is finally true that space has transcended our capacity to get our bearings in it then that is because we have taken the logic of passing through to its logical extreme and created smooth, frictionless spaces that hurry the postmodern subject onward like a slippery slope (Buchanan, 2005: 19).

A space of continuous passage beginning with the seasonal movements of early Indigenous Paiutes to accelerated modes of travel, the Las Vegas region has relied on various “tabula rasa” conditions to achieve a state of constant destruction and deterritorialization. With its incorporation in 1905, the municipality of Las Vegas developed themed spaces in a bid to attract railway tourists. The railway station was the area’s first grand civic structure, constructed in an exaggerated Western Frontier style by the Fred Harvey Company which appealed to the fantasies of East Coast travellers en route to California (Hess, 1993). By establishing a presence on the railroad, the city began to provide a rest stop for weary travellers in the form of hotels, bars, and casinos. The thematized nature of these establishments defined the region and reterritorialized upon the displacement of Indigenous peoples with naïve references to its desert locale including fantastical portrayals of cowboys, Navajo thunderbirds, and Saharan sultans. These pre-established associations affirmed the expectations of visitors who encountered the place directly, eroding the embedded history and sense of place in the region.

The early development of Las Vegas was also heavily influenced by organized crime syndicates, a group that operated largely outside of governmental control in a self-regulated “free market,” a precursor to the widespread adoption of neoliberal

principles. Organized crime affiliates had assumed control of a significant number of businesses in downtown Las Vegas during the 1930s. When gambling and alcohol were outlawed during the Prohibition, the continued operation of bars and casinos were reconfigured into an underground economy. Existing outside of the rule of law, the mob operated bars, casinos and brothels, advanced the commodification of leisure and perfected the provision of services. A relaxed approach toward law enforcement also permitted the presence of the mob to prosper under a veil of business fronts and dazzling themed spaces (Moehring & Green, 2005: 152).

By 1940, however, the city of Las Vegas sought to expand its tourist offerings by reaching out to Thomas Hull, an established developer of a successful California hotel franchise, the El Rancho. Despite the offer of prime real estate in the downtown area on Fremont Street, Hull purchased property in the desert just outside city limits. He established a precedent by recognizing the opportunity to develop an all-inclusive resort on a cheap swath of land while evading the municipal slot machine and ad valorem taxes in downtown Las Vegas (Moehring & Green 2005, 11). Although not a known mob affiliate, Hull's presence increased competition amongst casino owners fighting to maintain mob control of the region. An irreversible shift of new developments along the Strip outside of Las Vegas city limits began and the growth of a new all-inclusive building typology emerged as a result of plentiful space and low property taxes. Hull also saw the opportunity to attract visitors arriving from Los Angeles along the highway as well as increased control over the provision of key services such as water and security. This control over services generated cost advantages later attributed to the process of vertical integration.

Business owners gained increased control as the Strip was eventually designated as the unincorporated community of Paradise in 1951 in response to several annexation efforts by the city of Las Vegas. Unincorporated townships were "originally authorized to assist in the conveyance of land and are commonly thought of as a rural form of government with limited power" (Clark & Sharp, 2008). In other words, this designation is typically reserved for rural areas where a governing body cannot adequately provide municipal services like garbage collection, sewage and electricity. With an unincorporated designation, municipal responsibilities were shifted to Clark County, which appoints a Town Advisory Board to oversee the needs of Paradise including recommendations on zoning bylaw changes and land-use designations. This move protected the Strip from municipal annexation and formulated a unique set of conditions that encouraged further development of the Strip, formally signaling its divergence from the interests of casino resorts located in downtown Las Vegas.

Paradise, Nevada has since grown to become the most populated unincorporated township in the United States, further challenging its continued status as an informal city (US Census, 2010). As documented by Jill Clark and Jeff Sharp in *City & Community*, "unincorporated townships have grown so large that they are functional equivalents of cities, providing a broad range of services beyond their original 'rural' responsibilities" (2008). The unincorporated township, once a state of economic and political exception has since morphed into an accepted form of city building with essential services offloaded to the county level. The securing of the Strip as an unincorporated township facilitated a relaxed approach to urbanism and city

planning, one that fails to provide adequate public amenities for a growing city in favour of maintaining conditions more suitable for expansive private development.

By the end of the 1950s, additional casino resorts were constructed under mafia-controlled operations, including the Sahara, Sands, Dunes, Riviera, Tropicana and Stardust (German, 2014). The Teamsters Central States Pension Fund, a labour union representing truck drivers that was also affiliated with prominent mafia figures, provided millions of dollars in loans for new casino construction, becoming fully integrated into the growth of the leisure economy in the region (Moehring & Green, 2005: 211; Gottdiener et al., 1999: 24).

The Totalizing Image of Themed Spaces

With the opening of Jay Sarno's Caesars Palace in 1966, a new building typology was introduced in the form of a sprawling campus resort dressed in an all-encompassing theme. The campus of buildings expanded as a result of the accumulative process of monopolization, where programmatic elements could be added or swapped out in favour of newer, more profitable options. The deterritorialized space of the casino resort introduced a form of architecture, one that is designed to reduce stagnation – "its ground is not to be territorialized by fixed patterns of occupation" (Sanders, 2016: 137). This further secured capital accumulation as new elements could be incorporated under a totalizing image while refreshing the programmatic mix without compromising the operation as a whole. Casino resorts could maintain a high-level of consumer interest while offering an illusion of choice, a pre-planned selection of activities aimed at driving consumption.

In *Learning from Las Vegas*, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour and Robert Venturi describe the complex intermixing of programs at Caesars Palace under a single theme as "one of the grandest" (Brown, Izenour & Venturi, 1972: 50). A frenetic clash of references, reconstructed in postmodern decadence:

It is also a combination of styles. The front colonnade is San Pietro-Bernini in plan but Yamasaki in vocabulary and scale; the blue and gold mosaic work is Early Christian tomb of Galla Placidia. (The Baroque symmetry of its prototype precludes an inflection toward the right in this facade.) Beyond and above is a slab in Gio Ponti Pirelli-Baroque, and beyond that, in turn, a low wing in Neo-classical Motel Moderne. Economics has vanquished symmetry in a recent addition. But the new slab and the various styles are integrated by a ubiquity of Ed Stone screens. The landscaping is also eclectic. Within the Piazza San Pietro is the token parking lot. Among the parked cars rise five fountains rather than the two of Carlo Maderno; Villa d'Este cypresses further punctuate the parking environment. Gian de Bologna's *Rape of the Sabine Women* and statues of Venus and David with slight anatomical exaggerations, grace the area around the porte cochere. Almost bisecting a Venus in an Avis, a sign identifying No. 2's offices on the premises (Brown, Izenour & Venturi, 1972: 51).

Similar techniques involving the illusion of choice have also been adopted by totalitarian regimes, where “shifting stories and multiple masquerades” are required to continually refresh the “original myth or brand” (Easterling, 2005: 27). Hal Foster (2013) identifies the totalitarian illusion implicit in the campus typology in his critique of Koolhaas’ *Junkspace*, describing the absurd juxtapositions of program and space contained within. Just as campus resorts appear to accommodate everyone in its aggressive sprawl, consumption is framed as a great equalizer. Foster also notes that this fantasy is the “contemporary complement to the foundational myth of the United States: that such [class] divisions never existed here in the first place. It is this delusion that allows millions of Americans to vote against their interests at least every four years” (Foster, 2013: 59-60).

With advancements in travel technology and the growth of the leisure economy, the automobile had replaced the railroad as the primary means of transport into the region, significantly altering the relationship between architecture and movement. Documented in *Learning from Las Vegas*, the automobile influenced the formation of an emerging American commercial vernacular that relied on bold communication visible at high-speeds over vast distances. This relegated buildings to serve more pragmatic functions like shelter and program while the façade and roadside sign grew in prominence (Brown, Izenour & Venturi, 1972: 9). Two building typologies were defined with the first designated “the decorated shed,” a building “where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them” (Brown, Izenour & Venturi, 1972: 87). The second typology was defined as “the duck,” a building “where the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form” (Brown, Izenour & Venturi, 1972: 87). These two terms identified the growing prominence of the sign, and by extension the image, within commercial architecture.

Rem Koolhaas credits *Learning from Las Vegas* as “a manifesto for the shift from substance to sign...decipher[ing] the impact of substance on culture” (Obirst & Koolhaas 2001, 593). Guy Debord similarly observed the subsequent downgrading of *having* into merely *appearing* within contemporary capitalist society in the 1960s, warning that social relationships between people had unwittingly become mediated by images. Published in 1967, Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* was written at the time when this prolific survey of the Las Vegas Strip was being conducted, highlighting similar developments and a growing emphasis on image. Debord drew from Marxist theory to define the spectacle as “capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image”, exerting increased control over people’s lives to further consumption (Debord, 1994: 34). However, unlike *Learning from Las Vegas* and Koolhaas’ subsequent work, Debord remained highly skeptical of the growing influence of the image, denouncing its reinforcement of class divisions and the exploitation of the working-class proletariat.

The widespread proliferation of images via the introduction of the television was instrumental in driving consumerism in the United States following the Great Depression, a time when families had become accustomed to saving. In a push to make people more comfortable with accumulating debt and restoring faith in the American capitalist system, television program plot lines in the 1950s were “often centred around formerly frugal immigrant families learning that it was acceptable, and even desirable, to buy on credit or to replace home-made domestic products with appliances bought in shops” (Simpson, 2011: 198). The television industry was

intent on overcoming consumer resistance as a medium dependent on advertisers, by reframing prosperity and giving people the “sanction and justification to enjoy it and to demonstrate that the hedonistic approach to life is a moral one, not an immoral one” (Dichter, 1960: 209-210). This would resonate particularly with such illicit activities that had long been associated with Las Vegas, including gambling, liquor consumption and quick divorce proceedings. As a purveyor of hedonism, the region gained increased attention and further acceptance within the American mainstream.

The release of *Learning from Las Vegas* and the simultaneous acquisition of several casino properties by prominent billionaire Howard Hughes Jr., also served to legitimize a much-maligned gambling economy still dominated by organized crime. Investment in casino development also provided quick returns and the Las Vegas Strip demonstrated the lucrative potential of the industry on a large scale, attracting speculation and driving profits. The underground economy that had established development on the Las Vegas Strip functioned as an early precursor to “roll-back” neoliberalism in which companies or businesses operate in an unregulated marketplace, negotiating transactions through private contracts (Peck & Tickell, 2002: 384). In this phase, binding contracts are drafted to the benefit of business owners while granting increased control over suppliers, employees, and distributors.

Following this phase is a “roll-out” phase of neoliberalism, which Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell describe as the processes under which regulation is reintroduced into a system that has undergone deregulation in an attempt to incorporate those groups who had previously been marginalized or dispossessed by the free market. Measures to incorporate these groups included the criminalization of poverty and widespread incarceration under the premise of boosting “productivity” (Peck & Tickell, 2002: 389). Since the mob operated largely outside of governmental control through tax evasion, profit-skimming schemes, money laundering and intimidation of law enforcement, the government itself grew increasingly weary of such blatant violations of the law. In 1969, the Corporate Gaming Act was introduced, effectively allowing publicly traded corporations to own casinos for the first time in Nevada, attracting immediate interest from such hotel chains as the Ramada Inn, Hilton, and the Hyatt (Moehring & Green, 2005: 120). In conjunction with the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO), which gave the justice department increased agency to prosecute suspected members of the mafia, the government further attempted to seize control away from the mafia and capitalize off of the increasingly profitable Las Vegas Strip. Control of these businesses transitioned to corporate ownership models, as they were generally deemed to be less corrupt by government officials.

As the expansion of the Las Vegas Strip was sustained by corporate investment, theming became an increasingly crucial aspect of a resort’s brand in an increasingly cluttered commercial environment. The opening of Steve Wynn’s The Mirage in 1989 was an update to the prevailing resort model, becoming the Strip’s first new construction project in nearly 15 years. The sprawling 3 million square foot, \$700 million “megaresort” was an attempt to reinvigorate the Las Vegas Strip and attract new tourists. Built adjacent to Caesars Palace, The Mirage was constructed after Wynn had accumulated substantial capital through the sale of junk bonds and sold his Atlantic City Golden Nugget casino (Gottdiener et al., 1999: 33). The Mirage had nearly doubled the number of rooms of competitor Caesars Palace, generating an

estimated \$2 million dollars a day in revenue, far surpassing the \$1 million baseline required to service its interest payments and cover operating costs (Gottdiener et al., 1999: 34).

In the span of ten years, a slew of new resorts was constructed on the Strip, including the Luxor, Treasure Island, a new MGM Grand Hotel, Stratosphere, Monte Carlo, New York/New York, Bellagio, Mandalay Bay, the Venetian, and Paris. By the end of the 1990s, ersatz replicas of global cities had replaced the tropical or “exotic” themes of its predecessors, indicating a shift toward synthesizing a more familiar urban identity. Gambling would be overtaken as the sole revenue generator for Strip resorts, also indicating the growth of an array of other market sectors like entertainment, dining, and retail (Schwartz, 2015). This substantial transformation of the Strip was matched by a dramatic regional expansion becoming “the fastest-growing metropolitan area in the nation” by the year 2000, with the population expanding from 270,000 in 1970 to 1.3 million (Moehring & Green, 2005: 205). This accelerated growth further compromised an already strained public infrastructure with the transference of municipal responsibilities to private homeowner associations and gated communities.

De-theming and the Obfuscation of Power

Global cities are the convergence of capital and market speculation, where the urban centre is infinitesimally split into smaller and smaller portions, relying on images or ‘lifestyles’ to increase exchange-values. The prominence of the image initially identified as the “decorated shed” and the “duck,” totalized to the point of immersive ‘atmospheres’ and now, urban design. Urban rejuvenation and gentrification rely on a select set of images, reproducing the same urbanism for the expressed purpose of accelerating consumption and speculative value.

In our consideration of de-theming, we must acknowledge the systems of power and difference that are embodied in architecture and urbanism. Ruth Wilson Gilmore notes that racism is a product of the “fatally dynamic coupling of power and difference,” highlighting the potential for capitalist crises to be exploited by radical activism for “liberatory ends” (2002: 15, 22). This moment in the normalization of neoliberalism holds the potential to be exploited to yield social traction for disenfranchised and often racialized bodies. Throughout the history of Las Vegas, architecture has largely perpetuated systems of power and difference through tools such as segregation, restricted access, and the enclosure of public space. This has diminished the potential for labour to effectively congregate, particularly with the seemingly innocuous removal of thematic elements that have long indicated the threshold between public and private. The entrenched history of the modernist “tabula rasa” or the literal clearing of the slate, is instrumental in the constant removal, implosion and subtraction integral to the perpetual renewal of the Las Vegas Strip.

The most aggressive display of de-theming on the Las Vegas Strip occurred with the wholesale transformation of the Arabian-themed, Aladdin Hotel and Casino into Planet Hollywood. Opening in 1966, the original Aladdin Hotel and Casino featured a 15-storey Aladdin’s lamp sign alongside other elements inspired by Arabian Nights

imagery. The aging casino property was imploded in 1998 for the construction of a new resort, becoming the New Aladdin Resort and Casino which opened in 2000 with 2,500 rooms and sprawling retail mall. The resort resembled neighbouring properties in its meticulous recreation of a foreign urban environment, complete with references to Middle Eastern cities, mosque-style domed ceilings and a Baghdad themed food court. The terrorist attacks of September 11th occurred a year after its opening, casting the New Aladdin in an unfavourable light amongst Western tourists. After declaring bankruptcy in 2003, the property was sold to Planet Hollywood and Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide. It was subsequently rebranded as an unequivocally American entertainment themed resort with “The Desert Passage” retail mall renamed the “Miracle Mile Shops.” This process of de-theming left several traces of its previous incarnation intact with the mosque-style interiors painted over in grey and the central Baghdad food court layered with glowing neon signs affixed to its facade. The intention is unmistakable – these references to the Middle East have since been totalized by a reinvigorated imperialist American nationalism.

The de-theming of the New Aladdin Hotel and Casino also resonates with the renewed role of the American military located just outside the Las Vegas region. The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) estimates that the federal government, through its various agencies, owns a majority 81.1% of the land within the state of Nevada, forming the largest proportion of federal land ownership of any state within the United States (Congressional Research Office, 2012: 11). In addition to federal land ownership, the Department of Defense wields enormous power as the Nellis Air Force Range controls approximately 3.1 million acres of land in order to support “mission-related activities” with the base airfield situated a mere 20 km from the casino resorts of the Las Vegas Strip (Congressional Research Service, 2012: 4). Furthermore, the state-wide military presence has risen to increased prominence in recent years with the designation of the Joint Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (JUAV) Center of Excellence (COE) at nearby Creech Air Force base in 2005. This positions it as the primary base for the operation of Predator and Reaper drones in conflict zones, particularly those in the Middle East which include Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq (Axe, 2015). The proximity of the Creech Air Force base and the long history of regional military personnel frequenting the Strip reinforces the correlation of the military industrial-complex and the leisure economy.

The work of Controlled Demolition Incorporated (CDI) further emphasizes the alignment of state-sanctioned violence with displays of capitalist advancement. A series of implosions would precede the building boom of the Strip in the 1990s in order to accommodate increasingly elaborate megaresorts. Keller Easterling (2005) points the involvement of CDI in the US Department of State as well in its campaign to dismantle foreign regimes as an output of this dual notion of freedom. CDI president, Mark Loizeaux, has declared with some certainty that Las Vegas is “the implosion capital of the world” at the behest of their services (Anderson, 2015). Their work with the US Department of State has also ranged “from the design of and modification to missile fabrication facilities in South Africa to the elimination of weapons of mass destruction in Central European countries” (Easterling, 2005: 174). The interconnecting demolition services that CDI provides is yet another indication of the forces of the destructive deployment of neoliberal processes and the constant state of renewal commanded by de-theming.

Easterling also observes that the “shock and awe” strategy employed by the military in Iraq was “visually very similar to the mock battles that destroyed the Dunes Hotel in Las Vegas,” the levelling of two landscapes for capitalist expansion (2005: 175). Such historically significant buildings as the Dunes, the Aladdin, El Rancho, and the Stardust were all imploded within a 15-year span, signalling a clear break from the past. A prevailing condition of deterritorialization emerges, which declares that ““on this spot nothing will ever happen – and nothing ever has”” with which “...the forces of historical absence have set about designing their own exclusive landscape there” (Debord, 1994: 177). The erasure of historic buildings continues the accelerated passage of capital through the region, relinquishing ties to the past while intensifying the generic condition of the city.

The Neon Museum as Preservation of Collective Memory

While the Strip underwent its dramatic transformation in the 1990s, the Neon Museum partnered with the Allied Arts Council of Southern Nevada and the City of Las Vegas to begin acquiring and restoring discarded signs from shuttered Las Vegas businesses. In a city undergoing constant renewal, the Neon Museum has become an important indexological cataloguing of significant historic buildings. Befittingly, these artefacts are the only traces of buildings in a region defined by the roadside sign, reinforcing the prominence of signage within the American commercial vernacular. By 2012, the independent non-profit museum opened the Neon Boneyard, an outdoor exhibition space in downtown Las Vegas to showcase its growing collection of signs for guided tours and private events. Its entrance and gift shop are housed in the former La Concha hotel lobby, a notable curved concrete shell designed by prominent African-American architect Paul Williams. The signs on display in the Neon Boneyard are curated to convey a sense of place in a city without a built history; an index of disconnected artefacts punctuated by short anecdotes from enthusiastic young tour guides. In fact, the frenetic display of signs is distinctively Las Vegas in its composition, recalling the post-modern decadence ushered in with the opening of the Caesars Palace casino resort. Signifiers of demolished resorts are arranged by aesthetic, distorting scale, historical significance and time. For instance, the salvaged letters of the Moulin Rouge sign are strung together to spell “In Love” mere steps away from the colourful Lido de Paris sign. These two signs represent two different histories and are tossed together in new and absurd ways that prompt the rewriting of history.

Locating the Neon Museum in downtown Las Vegas situates it within an ongoing effort to repopulate a downtown beset by a seedy reputation that had long deterred tourists and locals from visiting. A renewal campaign would be led by developer couple, Jennifer and Michael Cornthwaite, who negotiated with city administrators over zoning changes and slowly acquired empty storefronts to renovate and populate with small businesses for minimal profit. Under the direction of then-Mayor Oscar Goodman, the groundwork was laid for sweeping changes in the area, freeing up many properties for unrestricted access to private sector development interests. These efforts caught the attention of Tony Hsieh, an eccentric multi-millionaire internet entrepreneur and acting CEO of online shoe retailer, Zappos.com.

After meeting with the Cornthwaites, Hsieh relocated 1000+ employees to downtown Las Vegas and leveraged the potential to enact dramatic change in the area under his overarching vision. His revitalization proposal was introduced and eventually branded as the Downtown Project in 2012, at the same time as the opening of the Neon Museum. The privately funded development project invested \$350-million over 5 years and focused on the creation of spaces for small businesses that could potentially transform the core into a thriving technology hub (Marshall, 2014). The key principles of the Downtown Project were derived from the *Triumph of the City*, a book by Edward Glaeser which touts the benefits of urban, high-density living and the movement away from suburban modes of living.

Additionally, the project mission statement echoes the ethos of Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002). It prescribes a technique that reduces ambiguous urban renewal strategies into flashy buzzwords in an attempt to lure potential investors and entrepreneurs. Since its release, *The Rise of the Creative Class* has been adopted by city administrators across the U.S. in an effort to attract new residents to quell stagnating populations at a time when urban centres had essentially hollowed out as a result of suburban flight and the loss of manufacturing sector jobs. Jamie Peck writes largely about the problems associated with the widespread adoption of Florida's strategies around urban rejuvenation, gentrification and the development of a neoliberal city, all in an effort to attract those who comprise the "creative economy." These strategies are focused on creating spaces for a specific class of individuals whose talents thrive in "urban environments that are open, diverse, dynamic, and cool" (Peck, 2005: 740). Furthermore, he suggests that while such marketing strategies may at first appear to be radical in redefining less favourable market-driven modes of development, they are actually reinforcing these established economic models while only thinly disguised by marketing jargon (Peck, 2005: 761).

At its core, the Downtown Project replicates the consolidation of the Las Vegas Strip; what was once comprised of many individual owners is now owned by a few key stakeholders. This process of monopolization is obscured under the guise of the image of global cities, with shipping container storefronts and boutique hotels replacing the local vernacular. Whether it is MGM Resorts operating multiple casino properties along the Strip or Tony Hsieh owning or providing loans to numerous downtown small businesses, the resulting urban form is one of a singular vision yielding highly manicured, prescriptive experiences. In both instances the needs of local residents are disregarded in favour of appealing to outsiders whether they are tourists or members of the extended 'creative economy'.

The obfuscation of labour and the local populace has been a direct consequence of de-theming wrought by constant renewal and destruction. Labour union contracts are subject to constant renegotiation, as demonstrated with the opening of several Strip megaresorts, compromising the effective bargaining power of labour unions amidst widespread prosperity. With the liberalization of labour laws introduced under the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act "right-to-work" legislation, the opening of the MGM Grand Hotel in 1993 further compromised the influence of labour unions in Las Vegas. Anticipating a strike over its decision to transition to an entirely non-unionized labour force, MGM persuaded the Clark County commission to designate the sidewalks surrounding its new hotel as private property. As a result, several protesters were arrested for trespassing on private property, establishing a precedent

for several other resorts to privatize sidewalks around their properties (Gottdiener et al., 1999: 117).

De-theming operates at a more sinister level than implosion or demolition however; its subtraction is subliminal, the absence almost imperceptible. As Easterling notes, “In some cases, building and subtraction are indistinguishable, and either may be equally aggressive, submissive, or constructive” (Easterling, 2005: 162). To this end, the apparent subtraction of themes of kitsch in Las Vegas is indistinguishable from meticulously orchestrated interior landscapes.

More broadly, Saskia Sassen notes that the spread of “mega-projects with vast footprints” like condominium towers, consequently kill “urban tissue,” “little streets and squares, density of street-level shops and modest offices, and so on” (2015). She describes this interiorization and privatization of cities as “de-urbanization,” noting that the loss of urban complexity diminishes the potential for disenfranchised groups to leverage social traction. Sassen concludes that:

Large cities have long been complex and incomplete. This has enabled the incorporation of diverse people, logics, politics. A large, mixed city is a frontier zone where actors from different worlds can have an encounter for which there are no established rules of engagement, and where the powerless and the powerful can actually meet (Sassen, 2015).

When cities are deterritorialized by expanding building footprints and subsequently de-urbanised, they are reterritorialized with a synthetic urbanism, a totalized themed environment that stands for what has been lost and is meticulously masterplanned to eradicate financial risk. This smoothing of spontaneity is evident with carefully planned city streets replicated from other cities, a formula to maximize income for private developers and minimize disruptors. De-theming describes the progression of themed spaces to the point where it becomes the image of contemporary globalised urban development; where the processes of designing places of consumption become synonymous with spaces of public gathering. An implicit violence is obscured by the allure of novelty and “fascination” operating on an “externally structured compulsion (enchantment)” which beckons the internal desire for gratification and seduction (Schmid et al., 2011: 6). The bright twinkling lights, the reassuring sounds and the comforting aromas synonymous with these scripted spaces, all serve to compel the consumer to seek further gratification. Again, “power is omnipresent and inherent to fascination” as it carefully orchestrates the consumer experience through the structures of an illusory urban environment to sustain its appeal (Schmid et al., 2011: 7).

Douglas Spencer also highlights the influence of such Deleuzian notions of affect in the architecture of neoliberalism, emphasizing that “the turn to affect is supposed, in immediacy of its expression, to have rendered interpretation redundant...Affect circulates between one thing and another. There is neither subject nor object of interpretation” (Spencer, 2017: 142). The push for gratification is generated by a familiar global urbanism, a smoothing of space intent on accelerating consumption through unrestricted flows. Global capital promotes an architecture that can be perceived in a multitude of ways, an architecture not defined by context and which is “adequate to a post linguistic, mutable and pluralistic social reality...” (Spencer, 2017:

142). The de-themed casino resort is no longer bound by a singular overarching theme and can instead accommodate a range of thematized slot machines. Casinos now offer gamblers an array of thematized options that appeal to various demographics, each with its own glowing interface broadcasting hours of entertainment in exchange for funds. A myriad of themes can be endlessly swapped out while the machine's underlying mechanisms remain essentially the same; constant renewal at minimal cost.

Conclusion

The rise of gambling as a legitimate leisure activity has encouraged patrons to spend freely, diminish concerns of risk, and boost speculation. In his analysis of emerging gambling city Macau, China, Tim Simpson notes that casinos have come to play an important role in conditioning society for the adoption of neoliberal principles. In particular, these principles include the “‘free’ movements of people and capital, increased individualism, market speculation, consumerism, [and] information technology” (Simpson, 2011: 198). His observation of Macau as an emerging capitalist centre in China resembles the rise to prominence of Las Vegas in the 1950s when capitalism was being reintroduced to a weary American public. Casinos act as factories that “produce no tangible product but the manipulation of consumer affect, principally directed towards excitement and fascination,” leading to further consumption (Simpson, 2011: 194).

Furthermore, the themed casino functions as a “normalizing apparatus” in which subjects are familiarized with the free flow of capital and a higher tolerance for debt (Barnett, 2001: 11). Gambling underwrote the rise of the leisure economy in Las Vegas, capitalizing off of liberalized social/economic/political philosophies while financing increasingly expansive resorts to propagate further consumption. The transition from table games to single-player slot machines in casinos is an indicator of a much larger trend toward social alienation promoted by the spectacular society. In the *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord emphasizes that “only an individual ‘isolated’ amidst ‘atomized masses’ could feel any need for the spectacle, and consequently the spectacle must bend every effort to reinforce the individual’s isolation” (Jappe, 1999: 7). Mass customization and individualism are provided under the guise of thematized slot machines, distilling themes of kitsch from the walls to the slot machines.

From downtown urban renewal projects to the rebranding of all-inclusive resorts as urban metropolis, de-theming utilizes the image of gentrification to obscure the threshold between public and private. What began as a deterritorialization of the desert has reterritorialized upon it an aggregate collection of ersatz cities. The interiorization of the city stretches beyond Las Vegas to other globalized urban cores, where condominium towers, office buildings and retail concourses consume the public realm. With the acceleration of travel through the region and constant renewal, the roadside sign remains as the marker of time. De-theming also operates as a normalizing apparatus for neoliberal principles, obscuring the consolidation of ownership that has resulted from market deregulation, emphasizing consumption and leisure activities, all while implying a self-sustaining urban form.

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Kurt Kraler is a registered Intern Architect (OAA) at ERA Architects, an interdisciplinary practice that engages with architecture, heritage conservation, adaptive reuse, urban planning, landscape and urban design. He completed his Master of Architecture degree at the University of Waterloo with a graduate thesis that focused on the political and economic production of themed spaces in Las Vegas and the broader social implications of the built environment. His work was recognized with the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Henry Adams Medal and Certificate. Kurt has presented his research and writing at the American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting (San Francisco), the Art Gallery of Guelph's *Symposium on Time and Temporality* (Guelph), and the Intersections/Cross-Sections Graduate Conference (Toronto). His work has also been published in *Scapegoat Journal* (Issue 10: NIGHT) and exhibited at the Design at Riverside Gallery (Cambridge, Ontario), Xpace Cultural Centre and PULP (Toronto), Lunds Universitet (Sweden), and the University of Waterloo Rome Studio (Italy).

Email: krkraler@gmail.com