

Nighttime and daytime blurred: hyperreality and kitsch in Las Vegas¹

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Abstract

This study investigates the production of hyperreality and kitsch in the last generation of tourist/gambling developments in Las Vegas. In these environments, the distinctions between nighttime and daytime are purposely blurred or made insignificant through their manipulation for the creation of spectacle and the production of a sense of alienation from time and reality. This suspension of real time and space, is aimed at both facilitating the deceiving perception of false, constructed 'natures;' and producing ideal sites for pleasure and consumption.

I engage this exploration through two main analytical concepts: hyperreality and kitsch. Building upon this theoretical framework, I propose the term hyperkitsch² to denote the phenomenon in Las Vegas, and I claim that people's fascination with hyperkitsch iconography that relates to the urban world results from their alienation from their real cities. Thus, in Las Vegas Strip, there are simulated urban landscapes upon where visitors enact fantasy lives and ease the emptiness and estrangement derived from conflicted urban identities and poor citizenship. The study is a contribution for understanding the current social crisis of urban identity formation-for both the human subject and the public sphere-amid the accelerating metamorphosis of our contemporary culture of spectacle, hedonism and consumerism.

Key words

Hyperreality, kitsch, hyperkitsch, spectacle, pleasure, consumption, Las Vegas.

Confusión del día y la noche: hiperrealidad y kitsch en Las Vegas

Resumen

El estudio investiga la producción de la hiperrealidad y de lo kitsch (o de mal gusto) en la última generación de desarrollos turísticos y lugares de apuestas en Las Vegas. En estos ambientes, las distinciones entre los periodos nocturnos y diurnos son intencionalmente desenfocadas o difusas, o hechas insignificantes mediante la manipulación de la creación del espectáculo o la producción de un sentido de la alineación del tiempo y la realidad. La suspensión del tiempo y del espacio real está dirigida a facilitar, tanto la engañosa percepción de una falsa naturaleza construida como a la producción de sitios ideales para el placer y el consumo.

Procedí con esta exploración basándome en dos conceptos analíticos: hiperrealidad y kitsch. A partir de este marco teórico, propongo el término hiperkitsch para indicar el fenómeno en Las Vegas y afirmo que la fascinación que experimentan las personas con la iconografía hiperkitsch relacionada con el ambiente urbano es resultado de la alineación de sus ciudades reales. Es así como en Las Vegas existen paisajes urbanos simulados, donde los visitantes personifican sus vidas de fantasía y desahogan el vacío y la ruptura derivada de sus identidades urbanas conflictivas y su pobre rol de ciudadano. El estudio contribuye al entendimiento de la actual crisis social en la formación de la identidad urbana -desde lo humano y lo público- ante la acelerada metamorfosis de nuestra cultura contemporánea del espectáculo, el hedonismo y el consumismo.

Palabras clave

Hiperrealidad, kitsch, hiperkitsch, espectáculo, placer, consumismo.

ON HYPERREALITY

Today we are experiencing an unprecedented change in how we comprehend the world and act within it. It is ever more difficult to tell the difference between fact and fiction, i.e., between what is real and what is imagined. We are increasingly immersed in a universe of "real-fakes" and "absolutely fake cities," reconstructed fantasy worlds that are "more real than reality" [Eco, 1988]. This blurring of the boundaries between the real and the imagined has produced a new vocabulary aimed at capturing that elusive, yet revolutionary change: reality is no longer what it used to be. The term that has come to be more widely used to define and conceptualize this growing confusion and fusion of the real-and-imagined is "hyperreality." Here, I review this concept to substantiate the claim that in Las Vegas, manipulations of well-known urban icons are exacerbated to its maximum producing a 'hyperreal' environment, which transcends and replaces its original sources of inspiration.

Jean Baudrillard, French sociologist and philosopher, is the most cited and controversial theoretician of hyperreality. He defines simulacra as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality, a hyperreal." Thus, hyperreality elevates simulation to a status of reality [Baudrillard, 1983]. Simulation "has no original or referent, for the model replaces the real" [Ellin, 1996]. These simulated environments become "realer-than-real, a real retouched and refurbished" [Best and Kellner, 1991]. The term hyperreality indicates the loss of the real as we knew it, where distinctions between surface and depth, the real and the imaginary no longer exist. In the hyperreal world, image and reality implode [Sim, 1999].

For Baudrillard, the notion of the hyperreal hinges around "the precession of simulacra": "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth it is the map that precedes the territory-precession of simulacra-it is the map that engenders the territory" [Baudrillard, 1983]. In his book *Simulations* [1983], Baudrillard discusses this notion of simulacra precession. With a passage from Ecclesiastes, he reminds us of the biblical use of the term simulacrum-a perfect copy of an original that may never have existed-to refer to the belief that the host and wine of communion really are the body and blood

of Christ. Thus, "[t]he simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth [...]. The simulacrum is true." It is now "impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real," for "the hyperrealism of simulation is expressed everywhere by the real's striking resemblance to itself." That is, the simulacrum 'precedes' or comes before or ahead of the reality, and defines the real as itself. "For Baudrillard, there are no longer any doubles, any hidden territories to be found beneath the surface. Everything, including the urban imaginary, is now condensed around simulations and simulacra" [Soja, 2000].

According to Baudrillard, simulation "effaces the very difference between the categories true and false, real and imaginary. We no longer have any means of testing pretence against reality, or know which is which. Nor is there any exit from his quandary. To report the change involved, we must say that 'from now on' the 'relationship has been reversed', that the map, as it were, precedes the territory, or the sign the thing. Yet such talk is itself illegitimate, for with simulation rampant even the words that we use 'feign to have what they haven't', i.e., meanings or referents. In fact we do not know the difference between the map and the territory, and would not know it even if we had our noses pressed up against the thing itself" [Bauman, 1888].

Baudrillard distinguish between simulation and dissimulation, the latter being the lies, prevarication, or deceptions that arise from the surface appearance of things. He argues: "To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But the matter is more complicated, since to simulate is not simply to feign ... [for] feigning leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real' and 'imaginary'" [1983]. For Baudrillard, the simulacrum is a metaphor for a new critical epistemology. It implies that images now mask the absence of reality, indicative of a transition from dissimulation to simulation, to the purging of all referentials and the substitution of signs of the real for the real itself. This precession of simulacra threatens the very existence of a difference between true and false, real and imaginary, signifier and signified [Soja, 2000].

Although debatable in Baudrillard's work, an argument can be made that he presents that ultimate state where the image "bears no relation

to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum," as an impending possibility rather than a consummated fact. This argument would allow to open up some opportunities for progressive politics of action and resistance to the prevailing conditions of postmodernity and the contemporary city [Soja, 2000]. While Baudrillard's notions may be-and have been-criticized in a number of ways, they undeniably capture a significant aspect of the commodified and mediated nature of our contemporary world in general, and of Las Vegas in particular.

Other scholars have critically engaged Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality, uncovering new perspectives or demystifying its assumed hegemony in processes of cultural production and consumption. Among them, Christine Boyer stretches the notion of hyperreality to question itself. Boyer addresses the expanding sphere of hyperreality in the urban domain in her 1996 book, using the term *CyberCities*. After problematizing the question of whether the cybercity represents the "final and irreversible erasure of the spatial containers that once stored our icons and images, the dematerialization of the wax into which our memories were once impressed... symbolically bombed into nothingness", as Baudrillard's understanding of hyperreality proposes, Boyer suggests that perhaps these fears are "yet another fiction" [Boyer, 1996]. If it were another fiction, however, we would still be stocked in the impossibility of action/reaction, disempowered by our own fiction. The unfortunate result of this option would be a surrendering with regard to the present urban scene that may rival the immobility of extreme baudrillardism.

Edward Soja, on his part, uses the term *Simcities* (adaptated from the title of a popular computer game) to define this complex restructuring of the urban imaginary brought about by the spread of hyperreality. For Soja, the dynamics embedded in simcities put in place a subtle form of social and spatial regulation, one that "literally and figuratively 'plays with the mind,' manipulating civic consciousness and popular images of cityspace and urban life to maintain order" [Soja, 2000]. Rheingold concurs with this disturbing panopticonian view of contemporary life, as the natural world and the social order is replaced with a technologically mediated hyperreality, a 'society of the spectacle' and ultimate state of alienation: "We don't see our environment as an artificial construction that uses media to extract our money and power. We see it as 'reality'-the way

things are. [...] Hyper-reality is what you get when a Panopticon evolves to the point where it can convince everyone that it doesn't exist; people continue to believe they are free, although their power has disappeared..." [Rheingold, 1993].

Finally, some of the scholars who have engaged the study of urban hyperreality are more upfront regarding their perceived opportunities for progressive politics, and some are profoundly critical of Baudrillard's views. For instance, In her book *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities*, Celeste Olalquiaga depicts a more urban, spatial, and political understanding of hyperreality than Baudrillard's. She argues that, "[d]espite being influenced by Baudrillard's gaze and believing that simulation is fundamental to the understanding of postmodernism, I disagree completely with his final analysis on the disappearance of the referent." Olalquiaga identifies and celebrates the new possibilities for creative resistance and subversion opened up by the spread of hyperreality. Focusing on contemporary Latin American 'magical hyperrealism' and their influence on the 'Latinization of the United States', she suggests that the expanded spatial scope-with its blurred boundaries, broken hierarchies, flexibility and fragmentation-bring about opportunities to engage in a more creative spatial praxis of transgression, boundary crossing, border work, and commitment to the right to be different. Ultimately, these practices could redirect the diffusion of hyperreality from its conservative channels to more progressive objectives [Olalquiaga, 1992].

In his book *America*, Baudrillard presents the U.S. as a model of hyperreality, where reality has entirely disappeared beneath the seductive surfaces of simulation. But it is in Las Vegas, more than anywhere else, that manipulations of well-known urban icons are exacerbated to its maximum, producing a hyperreal environment, which transcends and replaces its original sources of inspiration. Significantly, the ultimate symbol of the postmodern condition in Baudrillard's *America* is the desert, rather than the city, "because you are delivered from all depths there-a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference points" [Baudrillard, 1988]. Ironically born in the middle of one of the most inclement deserts in the world-the Mohave Desert-Las Vegas Strip is a perfect

illustration of a magical space which masks the absence of the real. Las Vegas-which used to be known and is still referred to by many as Sin-city-may be more appropriately nicknamed 'Simcity' (after Soja's term), for in its increasingly rapid trend of simulation creation, reality has been buried and an ever more elusive hyperreal landscape is constantly recreated.

ON KITSCH

The etymology of the term kitsch is uncertain. It is believed that it came into use in the 1860s and 1870s by painters and art dealers in Munich to designate cheap art. Whatever its origin, however, kitsch was and still is a strongly derogatory word. To call something kitsch is usually a way of rejecting it as distasteful, repugnant, or disgusting. There is no single definition of kitsch that is entirely satisfactory. However, we can come close to an understanding of the phenomenon by a socio-historical approach, in which kitsch is best explained as typically modern and, as such, closely linked to cultural industrialization, commodification, and hedonism; and an aesthetic approach, in which kitsch is understood as false art, the production of various forms of "aesthetic lies." The concept centers around the notions of imitation, forgery, counterfeit, and the aesthetics of deception and self-deception. By aestheticizing reality, kitsch defines its goal within a "closed system"-the finite universe of what is already known [Broch, 1969]. The basic feature of the kitsch's aestheticizing of reality, however, is the misrepresentation or distortion of the original meanings of the symbols it reappropriates. In Eco's terms, a kitsch product assumes the "garb of an aesthetic experience." Yet, it manifest itself as "something that seems out of place" [Eco, 1989]. In fact, kitsch implies the notion of aesthetic inadequacy, often found in single objects whose formal qualities (material, shape, size, etc.) are inappropriate in relation to their cultural content or intention. Kitsch, however, can mimic with profit the appearance of creative art and architecture. The kitsch designer mimics symbols which have proved successful and have been widely accepted or even turned into stereotypes. Kitsch's stylistic eclecticism thus coopts its artistic 'challengers' using stereotypes for its aesthetically conformist purposes [Calinescu, 1987].

Technologically and aesthetically, kitsch is one of the most typical products of modernity. Kitsch has to do with the modern illusion that beauty may be

bought and sold. Kitsch appears at the moment in history when beauty is socially distributed like any other commodity. Once kitsch is technically possible and economically profitable, the proliferation of cheap or not-so-cheap imitations of everything-from primitive or folk art to cities-is limited only by the market. Value is measured directly by the demand for reproductions of objects whose original aesthetic meaning consisted, or should have consisted, in being unique and therefore inimitable [Calinescu, 1987]

Kitsch may be viewed as a reaction against the fears of change caused by modernity and the fracture of chronological time. Under such conditions, kitsch appears as an easy way of 'killing time,' as a pleasurable escape from the banality of work and boredom of leisure, i.e., from the dullness of modern quotidian life. Kitsch attempts to assuage the fear of emptiness and provide a response to the widespread modern sense of spiritual vacuum: it fills the empty time of leisure with 'fun' and it fills empty spaces with an hallucinatory assortment of fascinating appearances. "What constitutes the essence of kitsch is probably its open-ended indeterminacy, its vague 'hallucinatory' power, its spurious dreaminess, its promise of an easy 'catharsis'" [Calinescu, 1987]. Kitsch lends itself to a definition in terms of escapism, a systematic attempt to fly from daily reality. Within the unsettling transformations brought about by modernity, kitsch turned into an aesthetic refuge for people to cope with the forces of uncertainty; in particular, with the substitution of the notions of tradition with the ideal of progress, and the erosion of the notion of linear time. The widespread sense of instability and discontinuity makes instant enjoyment a 'reasonable' thing to strive for. Hence, the drive toward consumption and the whole paradoxical concept of a 'throw-away landscape.'

Kitsch uses avant-garde procedures for purposes of "aesthetic advertising." Architects and interior and set designers in Las Vegas turn into skillful propagandist trying to 'sell' accepted ideological commonplaces through historical specific architecture. The cultural content of the buildings becomes kitsch when it assumes a false identity. The aesthetic falsification consists of the use of historically expressive means that have nothing to do with the objective of the building, but is rather the packaging of an ideological message. Nearly everything directly or indirectly associated with 'high culture' can be turned into something fit for immediate consumption-a commodity. Part of

the attractiveness of a kitsch object derives from its commercial availability, from the fact that it can be bought. Even the most elaborated and expensive varieties of kitsch—such as kitsch architecture—contain a built-in self-advertisement, an invitation to possession and ready enjoyment. Kitsch, therefore, is one of the most direct manifestations of the triumphant aesthetics and ethics of consumerism [Calinescu, 1987].

If kitsch emerged as an expression of the taste of the middle class and of its compensatory, spare-time hedonism, as a form of ideology (false aesthetic consciousness) it appeared spontaneously. Then, the prevailing Marxist view that it was deliberately introduced by the upper classes to divert the masses from their revolutionary vocation is fundamentally incorrect, as Calinescu proposes. Yet, an argument could be reintroduced today that, given that the contemporary architectural production of hotel casinos in Las Vegas is in the hands of a few multimillion corporations making colossal profits, their hegemonic practices of social control through architecture do have an impact in preventing the masses from the construction of subjects, leading to false consciousness. Truly enough, this process of alienation is facilitated by a human readiness for self-deception. In the late 1940s, Adorno had already explained it: "People want to have fun. A fully concentrated and conscious experience of art [or architecture] is possible only to those whose lives do not put such a strain on them that in their spare time they want relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously. The whole sphere of cheap commercial entertainment reflects this dual desire. It induces relaxation because it is patterned and pre-digested" [Adorno, 1947].

Thus, the tendency to hedonistic consumption and the effect of alienation creates the "kitsch-man" [Calinescu, 1987]. A kitsch-(hu)man is one who experiences as kitsch even non-kitsch works or situations, involuntarily making a parody of aesthetic response. With her/his hedonistic perspectives of what is artistic or beautiful, the kitsch-human wants to fill his spare time with maximum excitement in exchange for minimum effort. For her or him, the ideal is effortless enjoyment. Yet, to believe the simulation hidden in kitsch is a sign of either undeveloped or atrophied critical sense. The kitsch-human with undeveloped critical sense shows mental passivity and spiritual laziness. However, the undemanding consumer of kitsch can also be subjected to disempowering alienation, showing

an atrophied critical sense. Most probably, the two processes are at work. A kitsch work implies a collaboration between the producer and consumer of kitsch, the kitsch-architect and the kitsch-human. The latter wants to be 'beautifully' lied to and the former is willing to do it in exchange for financial gain. In this game of illusions and spurious impressions, the liar eventually may end up believing that what s/he says is the truth, i.e., the kitsch-architect may lose consciousness of her/his intent of producing kitsch.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned discussion, recent cultural studies on kitsch reclaim the subject from the domain of art history. By undertaking an exploration of the cultural history and philosophical connotations of kitsch, this aesthetic phenomenon is uncovered as much more than cheap imitation of art or "pretentious bad taste" [Webster's Dictionary]. Rather, kitsch is recognized as "the ability to surpass essential belongings and rest in more superficial ones, to create an imaginary landscape through accumulation and camouflage, and to crystallize the continuous movement of life in the permeable disguise of fantasy" [Olalquiaga, 1998]. The appeal of kitsch "prods us beyond simple, nostalgic yearnings and sentimentality to irrational acceptance of the impossible or the incongruous" [Brown, 1987].

According to Olalquiaga in her thorough study of kitsch, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* [1998], the Victorian era and the industrial revolution of the late 19th century were the main ancestors of kitsch. During these periods, people stuffed their homes with fantasy-themed artifacts to fill the existential emptiness brought about by rapid industrialization. Olalquiaga claims that our fascination with kitsch items inspired in the natural world results from our alienation from nature. Thus, we are left with the attempt to repossess the experience of intensity through artificial objects that give the illusion to capture life, however inexactly. Proposing that kitsch is therefore the product of a larger sensibility of loss, Celeste Olalquiaga claims that it enables the momentary re-creation of experiences that exist only as memories or fantasies. Sadly, the effort of repossession is always frustrated, since kitsch oscillates constantly between the embodiment of lived experience and its loss.

"Kitsch is the scattered fragments of the aura, traces of dream images turned loose from their matrix... covering the emptiness left by both the aura's demise and modernity's failure to deliver its promise of a radiant future. [...] [K]itsch is the leftover of modernity's own dreams of transcendence, a remnant loaded simultaneously with hopes and the impossibility of their realization, a ruin."

In keeping with the demands of an affluent consumer society, the boundaries of kitsch have expanded dramatically in our times, ranging from all forms of kitsch 'art' to kitsch 'architecture' and 'urbanism', i.e., from objects that we can possess, to spaces that we can inhabit. In addition, in our times kitsch has become increasingly associated with the works of the tourist industry. The Yugoslavian philosopher Gillo Dorfles stated it blatantly: "tourism is the home of kitsch." As Dorfles sees the relationship between tourists and the environment as rarely genuine, "it is this veil of falseness, imitation and admiring sentimentality that more often than not makes the world, as it appears to the tourist, vomit kitsch all over itself" [Dorfles, 1969]. Kitsch architecture in Las Vegas, however, not only does suggest richness and superfluity, but also is deceptively inexpensive to consume. Hotel prices are considerably cheap for the high standard of services they offer. However, the average visitor spends-or waste-a lot more money than she/he anticipated in her/his stay participating in gambling and entertaining activities. This is precisely the goal of investors. On the other hand, these palaces of consumption and deception are anything but cheap to produce and maintain, as some hotel/casino costs and dimensions of operation would immediately put in evidence.

ON HYPERKITSCH

A downfall of the natural order in the nineteenth century triggered a longing for and glorification of what had been lost. Then, the notion of 'nature' and 'traditions' were reproduced either fossilized or abstracted, with industry and science inventing ways to retain their evanescent realm. Olalquiaga claims that the production of objects aiming to recapture nature and traditions under these circumstances, only showed the demise of their aura's authenticity-i.e., they were kitsch. What was quickly disappearing "was idealized as containing an essence whose appeal increased in direct relation to its experiential decrease."

"[K]itsch is nothing if not a suspended memory whose elusiveness is made ever more keen by its extreme iconicity. Despite appearances, kitsch is not an active commodity naively infused with the desire of a wish image, but rather a failed commodity that continually speaks of all it has ceased to be-a virtual image, existing in the impossibility of fully being. Kitsch is a time capsule with a two-way ticket to the realm of myth-the collective or individual land of dreams. Here, for a second or perhaps even a few minutes, there reigns an illusion of completeness, a universe devoid of past and future, a moment whose sheer intensity is to a large degree predicated on its very inexistence. This desperately sought moment, this secret treasure buried at the bottom of the sea, taints all waking experience with a deep-felt longing, as if one lived but to encounter once again this primal, archaic pleasure of total connection" [Olalquiaga, 1998].

I argue that kitsch is a phenomenon more relevant to our own time than it was to the era that made it a massive experience, because the conditions of large sensibilities of loss first experienced amidst the industrial revolution have all but unprecedentedly grow in our present world. Therefore, extrapolating both in time and realm of experience from Olalquiaga's work, it is my claim that today the downfall of the quality of the urban environment and the urban life in American cities in the last half century has triggered a longing for and glorification of what has been lost. I contend that people's fascination with hyperkitsch iconography that connects to the urban world results from their alienation from their cities. Again, (building) sciences and (tourist and entertainment) industries combine to recreate and 'perfect' the city's role as a bearer of human and social urban identities. The architectural complexes offered to soothe this longing for an authentic city flavor in Las Vegas evoke-through heavily charged multimedia imagery-an intensity of unconscious feelings, reminiscences and remembrances. When hotel/casinos in Las Vegas simulate cities, they provide a uniquely effective media for the recreation of evanescent fantasies and recollections of particular times and spaces. The more these very notions of time and space become ambiguous and fragmented in the global era, the greater the urge to crystallize idealized notions of time and 'placeness'.

"It is in this intrinsic contradiction between a desire and the preclusion of its unfolding that the dialectics of kitsch take place, moving between an irretrievable past and a fragmented present, at home only in the certainty of its own impossibility. [...] [T]he impossibility of recovering what is lost only exacerbates the efforts towards its achievement and, since the desired goal is extremely elusive... the search is guaranteed as a permanent condition. It is through this hopeless search that loss becomes commodified, made to substitute for the real thing" [Olalquiaga, 1998].

When kitsch substitutes real things by commodified loss, hyperreality is created. In postmodern cultural sensibility, kitsch thus turns to be one of the most appropriate media by which the previous beliefs in originality, authenticity, and symbolic depth are challenged by an eclectic appreciation of surface and allegorical values. This move does not get rid of reality. Rather, it promotes a "broadening of the notion of reality, whereby vicariousness is not longer felt as false or secondhand but rather as an autonomous, however incredible, dimension of the real" [Olalquiaga, 1992]. Moler names this phenomenon "neokitsch" [Moler, 1971]; and Olalquiaga calls it a "second-grade kitsch" or "kitsch-kitsch". For them, this new dimension of kitsch collapses the different between reality and representation, making the latter the only possible referent. This self-referential kitsch-a kitsch-kitsch-defamiliarizes the traditional notion of reality, turning representation itself into the real [Olalquiaga, 1992]. Thus established the link between kitsch and hyperreality, I propose an even better tailored hybrid word for our discussion, the term "hyperkitsch".

In Las Vegas Strip, historically loaded, yet debased landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower, the St. Mark's Square and Campanile, or the Imperial Roman Forum become devoid of their original socio-historical and cultural meaning and are repackaged to millions of visitors as mere sites of gambling and consumption. That rupture of historical continuity to commercial doodad equates betting and buying in comfort with the hyperkitsch illusion of participating in a historically or contemporary authentic urban experience.

NIGHTTIME WORLD-CLASS CITIES, LAS VEGAS' STYLE

Since the advent of urban electrification -more than a century ago now- night in the city has been understood and studied as a site with numerous meanings and possibilities: pleasure, terror, escape, reclamation, visibility, invisibility, surveillance, crime, insurrection, consumption, containment, and chaos, among others. For the first half of the twentieth century, Las Vegas touched upon all of those aspects. The city was indeed an excessive, dangerous, promiscuous warren of spaces ran by mobs, where pleasure was seasoned with danger, and where desire and illegality ran free in alleyways, clubs, bars, theatres, music halls and gambling dens. During those first decades of the twentieth century, red-light districts flourished, and Las Vegas earned a reputation of "Sin City."

Many transformations of the urban landscape have followed, which can be analyzed as distinct generations of hotel-casino styles in Las Vegas. First, there were the relative low-key casino buildings inspired by Western imagery and dressed up in extravagant neon signs, which catered to adults only. Then came the Flamingo Hotel by Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, which introduced Hollywood imagery and modern glamour in the 1940s and 1950s. This trend diversified the adult clientele, and opened great opportunities for show business in Las Vegas. A new era was going to be introduced by the ground-breaking opening of Ancient Roman-themed Caesars Palace in 1966, pared with the family-oriented Circus-Circus in 1968, both by visionary Jay Sarno.

In 1969, new regulation allowed corporations to own the casinos, and a handful of risky entrepreneurs aimed to bring legitimacy and radical transformation to Las Vegas entertainment industry and landscape. Rapidly, Las Vegas was transformed in a site of a purified, space off/for pleasure inhabited by a well-regulated population. Transgressive pleasure was put into line and offered up as a package of commodified contentment. The calculated, rationalized, and repetitive programmes for the new multimillion, overabundantly themed hotel casinos in Las Vegas have often been inspired by stereotyped images, remembrances, and reminiscences of past and present city experiences. These simplified, conforming images are provided in place of complex urban

experiences arising out of the juxtapositions and accumulations of human histories and schemes, derived from a multitude of spontaneous encounters and sudden glimpses of architectural oddities and bustling public spaces in cities. For each city-themed hotel casino in Las Vegas is populated, not by the spontaneous movements of urban inhabitants, but by those carefully induced movements of tourists and gamblers. The cities thus cartooned, became not a complex of compelling spaces of surprises, but a series of packaged, predictable zones of enjoyment [Rose, 2000]. In this theming operation, the signifiers of 'night and the city' as a space-and-time atmosphere of multiple and adventurous meanings and (transgressing) opportunities have been coopted by the masters of place-making in Las Vegas, to produce contained and controlled spaces where clients can act out their nightlife fantasies in a deceivingly safe environment. These environments are not really risk-free, however, because bad luck and induced excess -e.g., in gambling, drinking, or making out- can drive a person to her ruin, just as it may happen in the 'real' city streets.

The Jay Sarno of the first generation of themed and mass appealing hotels of the late 1960s and 1970s, found its successor in Steve Wynn, who has been a key agent in the transformation of Las Vegas in an all-purpose, family oriented destination resort. His hotel complexes The Mirage (1989) and Treasure Island (1993) have strongly reaffirmed and sophisticated themed architecture in Las Vegas as the new style of hotel casinos. With the volcano show at The Mirage and the Bucanner Bay Sea Battle at Treasure Island, the sign designers of Las Vegas have been definitely replaced by the show designers as the main masters of image making³.

Throughout the 1990's, the opening of each new hotel in Las Vegas prompted a dramatic increase in room occupancy. The city has now over 100 thousand hotel rooms. This trend culminates on the avenue known as The Strip: more than two-thirds of all Las Vegas visitors stay at properties on or adjacent to The Strip. Attracting more than 33 million visitors each year, Las Vegas Strip is an astonishing hypersite theme park set to evoke images of idealized world-class cities. The designers dispensed with history, to sell instead a new present: improved 'urban realities' within tightly controlled spaces. In The Strip, mega-graphics, neon lighting, mega billboard signage, show performances, and dramatic architecture combine to intensify a constructed urban experience and tie it to entertainment and retail themes of contemporary world-class cities of other latitudes or times.

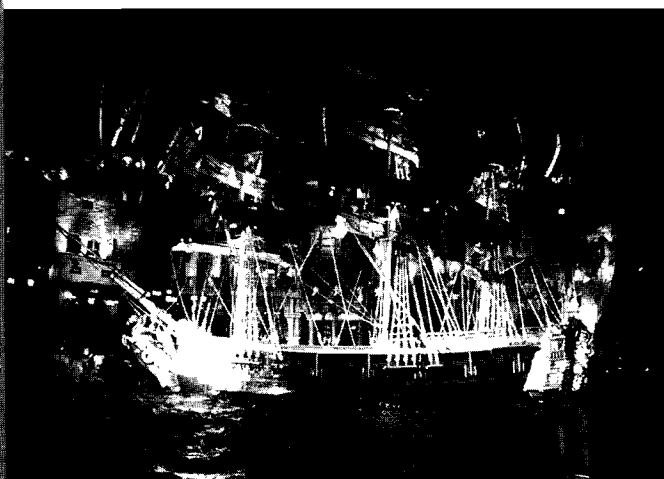


The Bellagio Hotel/Casino

As this study investigates the production of hyperkitsch in the last generation of hotels in Las Vegas, I start by focusing on two specific examples of urban-ish re-creations (hyperrealities) of nighttime Rome and New York: The Forum Shops at Caesar's Palace Hotel/Casino, and the interior of the New York-New York Hotel/Casino. I believe these two hotels established a new fad in hotel design in The Strip, and have since then become recurrent precedents for the new complexes.

Caesar's Palace

The first and the oldest casino hotel in Las Vegas which started the trend towards theme



Bucanner Bay Sea Battle at Treasure Island

architecture and family entertainment is Caesars Palace. Since its opening in 1966, Caesars Palace has been one of the very few hotels from the 1960s which has been able to keep up with the rapid pace of transformation in Las Vegas, partly because it has been able to successfully renovate itself accordingly. Caesars Palace conveys the imaginary golden era of the Imperial Roman Empire through paraphernalia saturated with clichéd signifiers: columns, fountains, statues, etc. It attempts to create a world resplendent in regal pleasures, offering lavish service, accommodations, cuisine, recreational opportunities, and entertainment events. Caesars Palace is an example of nostalgic kitsch embodied not in the building, but in an entire experience. In Olalquiaga's words:

"Kitsch is a spell to which one succumbs willingly, knowing its delicate fabric can disintegrate with the slightest interference, who knows when to be reconfigured again. An interregnum, kitsch drifts between waking and sleeping hours, half dream and half reality, all memory and desire. [...] Kitsch is the world as we would like it to be, not as it is: the capturing in a concrete thing of the most ineffable feelings and tenderest emotions" [Olalquiaga, 1998; my emphasis].

Olalquiaga claims that nostalgic kitsch sacrifices the potential plurality of meanings. It is a "shrunken sign", reduced to its most basic and benign expression. "Nostalgic kitsch is static, it doesn't move, it just oscillates back and forth between the glorified experience and its subject, without any transformation" [Olalquiaga, 1998]. As nostalgic kitsch, Caesars Palace's advertisement depicts it as "the most indulgent society ever." Other socio-political realities of that historical Roman Empire, i.e., other meanings and experiences and the meanings and experiences of 'others', are forced out. In any case, this formula of nostalgic hyperkitsch in Caesars Palace in Las Vegas has been so successful, that siblings have been created in Atlantic City, Tahoe, and Indiana.

In Caesars Palace, the list of kitsch detailing in the impossible effort of theming a contemporary hotel on ancient Roman style seems endless. However, I concentrate on the most recent addition to the themed complex: the Caesars Forum Shops, a 200,000 square feet, \$110 million structure. The Forum is an outrageous mix of shopping mall and entertainment center that

started a new trend in Las Vegas: the blurring of night and day time. At the Forum, people live the outmost illusion when the outside is brought inside: the Forum has a ceiling that simulates the sky. As programmed lighting simulates the transitions from dawn to dusk every hour, an atmosphere with its own surreal temporality is created. As the ceiling-sky changes from night to day at an accelerated pace, it subverts biological time clocks, catalyzing the anxiety of consumerism. The blurring of nighttime and daytime puts the shoppers in an atemporal state of (un)consciousness, compelling people to loose track of the time spent there, leading to the prolongation of their visit.



The Forum Shops at Caesar's
Palace Hotel/Casino

In the Forum Shops at Caesars, the piazzas, statuary, fountains, and façades attempt to simulate the streets of historic Rome. Mythology itself is turned into a repetitive spectacle. An advertisement claims: "The gods themselves smile on The Forum Shops, coming alive at the Festival Fountain and at the Atlantis attraction every hour from later morning through late evening seven days a week." Indeed, to the astonishment of observers, these statues surprisingly start moving and talking at certain show times. If one imagine that those amazingly kitschified statues are there to evoke the ones artists from Imperial Rome or from Italian