

# LANDSCAPES OF CONTRADICTION IN LAS VEGAS:

## the costs of sustaining hyperreality

by Liette Gilbert

### INTRODUCTION

Las Vegas, increasingly imploded by the same imagineering principles used by the Walt Disney Company, has come to represent both the commodification of reality and the production of hyperreality. The nature of landscape has been highly commodified. The mature lush palms and specimen trees growing in the casinos' neon lights create an instant landscape faster than the 6-hour road trip delivery from a Southern California nursery. Inside the casinos and hotels, forests of lush vegetation (made of preserved trees rebuilt of natural materials or handcrafted from silk to steel) reach a climax of artificiality. Nature on the Las Vegas Strip is a 500-year olive tree in Caesar's Palace or a 60' tall chestnut tree on the promenade of Paris Las Vegas that is native to a naturalist-sculptor's studio in San Diego prominently listed on the Baron's 500 Leaders for the Next Century (Naturemaker 2003). Hyperreality has replaced reality, making artifice the predominant nature along the Strip.

But this artifice is not limited to the Strip or to the city itself. It is anchored in the history and future of the Las Vegas Valley where the daring contrast and the perfect blurring of nature and artifice irritate and surprise. The desert landscape is far from being simply a system of natural features. It is better understood as a "self-conscious cultural collection" of simulated spaces superimposed in place and time, functioning and evolving according to natural processes, social practices, and ideological assumptions (Cronon 1996). In this land of hyperreality, the toponymy itself simulates contradictions: Las Vegas once meant 'the meadows' but is now characterised by the most technologically advanced waterworks for displaced dolphins, reenacted pirates battles, and desert-scorched beachgoers. It is the *terra nullis* perception of the surrounding Las Vegas Valley

desert that has allowed for Las Vegas to become and maintain itself as the urban capital of hyperreality. This short essay reviews three regimes of hyper-growth that have made Las Vegas Valley a place where artifice has unquestionably naturalised and where these constructions of hyperreal environments create landscapes of contradiction.

### FEDERALISATION AND MILITARISATION OF THE LANDSCAPE

The complex geology of volcanic, sedimentary and tectonic activities characterising the Las Vegas Valley is reshaped by the forces of gambling, militarisation, and (sub)urbanisation. For more than 10,000 years humans have occupied the Las Vegas Valley desert; however, it is relatively recent changes that have significantly altered the landscape. Nevada's high level of federal land ownership, combined with low population density and a perception of the valley as a desert wasteland, make this environment an 'ideal' location for federal projects and defense programs. The construction of the railroad in 1911 linking the Union Pacific mainline from Utah to Southern California triggered the rise of the city of Las Vegas. In 1929 the Las Vegas economy was boosted with the construction of Boulder Dam (now Hoover Dam), Lake Mead, and the first interstate expressway to Los Angeles (with Hollywood connections later traveling back to Las Vegas).

Having secured an abundance of power and water, in 1941 Las Vegas became the prime site for two other federal projects: the Basic Magnesium Plant and an aerial gunnery school (now Nellis Air Force Base). Clear skies, year-round flying weather, vast areas of public lands, and hill and canyon topography make southern Nevada an ideal site for military training. The 2.9 million acres occupied by Nellis Air Force Range (including the Nellis Air Force Bombing and Gunnery Range) is the largest air and

ground space available for military operations in the western world. In 1951 the Nevada Test Site was established for nuclear bombing practices, weapons production, and waste dumps.

In the two decades following the construction of the Test Site, 651 US and 19 UK nuclear weapons have been exploded in the Las Vegas Valley (Wilson 1992). In 2002, Yucca Mountain (occupied by the Western Shoshone Nation) was approved by US Congress as the national repository site for 77,000 tons of high-level radioactive waste and spent nuclear fuel. Its location 100 miles north-west of Las Vegas, the safety and security hazards related to underground storage, the transportation of nuclear waste (across 43 states), the political and environmental pressures on Nevada to 'host' the nation's nuclear waste for the benefit of other states, and mounting evidence of unsuitability of the site because of interacting geologic, hydrologic and tectonic conditions, are some of the most obvious concerns about nuclear waste policies and impacts on natural and human landscapes (Strolin 1989; Eureka County Yucca Mountain Information Office 2003). The nuclearisation of Nevada's desert defines an end to what was once perceived as an uncontaminated frontier.

### GAMBLING ON THE LANDSCAPE

Gambling in Nevada was made legal in 1869, became illegal in 1913, and was re-legalised in 1931 for the enjoyment of Hoover Dam builders, and later for defense personnel. Federal spending on development in the Valley and city was quickly replaced by Hollywood capital. In 1946, Bugsy Spiegel transformed the Las Vegas Strip into a world-renowned spectacle of gambling and entertainment. The development of early casinos (the Flamingo, Desert Inn, Sands, and Caesar's Palace, among others) was fuelled by illegal and legal organ-

ised-crime financing, which changed the moral and urban landscapes of the city, and ensured tight control of the gaming industry's legislation (Rothman 2002).

After the passage of the revised Corporate Gaming Act in 1969, the shady activities of mob kings were replaced by the glitzy public image of corporate princes like Howard Hughes, Kirk Kerkorian and Steve Wynn. In the 1980s and 1990s these men demolished casinos less than three decades old and erected a new generation of resort developments owned by giant gaming conglomerates composed of hotel chains and entertainment corporations. The new Las Vegas mega-casino resorts (The Mirage, Treasure Island, MGM Grand, Paris Las Vegas, etc.) no longer market themselves as simple casinos, but rather as tourist and family-oriented entertainment attractions. In 2001, Las Vegas attracted more than 34 million visitors. Gaming revenues alone reached 7.6 billion dollars in Clark County and 6 billion in Las Vegas, while the economic impacts of tourism generated 31.9 billion dollars (Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority 2003). Sin City became Dream City.

Las Vegas' built environment and gambling/entertainment economy celebrate the production of simulation and artificiality by constantly proposing seductive representations of affluence and mobility to be consumed as fast as capitalism renews itself. However, this fascination for the hyperreal conceals other environmental realities.

#### URBANISATION OF THE DESERT LANDSCAPE

The Las Vegas metropolitan area's population grew from 273,000 in 1970 to 1.3 million in 2000, keeping Las Vegas the fastest growing metropolitan area in the United States throughout the 1990s (Moehring 2000). New residents, attracted by the lure of an ever-growing service economy (with many unionised jobs), have expanded the (sub)urbanisation of Las Vegas into the adjacent desert, spreading with it all the socio-political, economic and environmental contradictions such growth entails. The result has been a sea of master-planned residential subdivisions designed for singles, families, and retirees sprawling across the desert of Clark County. Developers have benefitted from lower property taxes outside the city because of the enormous property tax revenue paid by the casinos on the Strip, which is not part of the City of Las Vegas

but part of Clark County. This particular tax structure continues to leave many residents of the city without adequate services and underfunded schools, libraries, parks, recreational services and amenities (Moehring 2000). Boosters (real estate developers and resort operators) proudly promote the unregulated growth climate to attract development, but not without exacerbating tensions over the commodification of water, air and land.

Perhaps only in Las Vegas could urban sprawl actually be presented as the solution to a water crisis when the desert city's aquifer was simply running out of water. Having reached the limits of Nevada's allocation of the Colorado River Compact negotiated in 1922 between seven Southwestern states, in 1989 the Southern Nevada Water Authority (serving almost two thirds of the Nevada population) filed claims on every drop of available ground water in most of the southern part of the state. It also filed claims on the Virgin River, a tributary of the Colorado River intended to be channelled through a two-billion-dollar pipeline against much public opposition. Yet it appears that the Authority did not actually support the costly construction of this proposed pipeline. It preferred instead to let the Virgin River flow closer to Lake Mead, building a much shorter pipeline from Lake Mead, and securing the capacity of the city's drinking water. This solution was made suddenly possible by the fortuitous reform plan of the Bureau of Land Reclamation providing voluntary transfers of water between the signatory states of the Colorado River Compact and allowing Nevada and California water agencies to negotiate the banking and leasing of future water in Arizona (Christensen 2000).

With water supply secured for the Valley, urban development accelerated almost overnight and created a major air pollution problem in Southern Nevada. In recent years, air pollution levels have ranked Las Vegas Valley among the most unhealthy in the United States due to vehicle emissions, construction dust particles, and wood-burning fireplaces. The problematic levels of carbon monoxide and construction dust particles regularly prevent the city from meeting national air pollution standards prescribed by the Environmental Protection Agency (Moehring 2000). Persons with respiratory diseases, allergic reactions, and the elderly are often advised to stay inside when brown haze veils the sky of Las Vegas Valley, while car reliance remains unquestioned, and pol-

lution citations on construction sites are accepted as business expenses (Parker 2002).

As urban sprawl spawns highway and road systems between suburban subdivisions, the already limited open space system (park ratio is less than 2 acres per 1 000 residents compared to the recommended national standard of 10 acres per 1 000 people) is increasingly threatened by urban development (Parker 2002). Although Vegas is the epitome of recreational and cultural opportunities for visitors, amenities are virtually absent for residents. The shortage of public spaces for residents is just another contradiction, contrasting with casinos, hotels and resorts that constantly surpass each other in reinventing the most popular and profitable attractions.

With an economy dominated by the service sector, the burden of social and environmental costs has disproportionately impacted specific groups of residents laboring as waiters/waitresses, maids, retail and office clerks, and janitors on the Strip. Despite many unionized jobs, newcomers settling in Las Vegas are challenged just as much by the gap between dream and reality as they are by the gap between nature and artifice. The concrete manifestations of urban sprawl in the desert rest on the same ephemerality of development, artificiality of land, air, and water resources, and commodification that boosted the origins of Las Vegas. As Lyotard once wrote, "capitalism inherently possesses the power to derealise familiar objects, social roles and institutions to such a degree that the so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality" (Lyotard 1984: 143).

#### CONCLUSION

The conflation of the simulated and the real, once reserved to Disneyland, has spread through Las Vegas. Not only does it represent the new model of urban development for popular entertainment, it also blurs the pretensions and the manifestations of 'reality' Although it may be difficult and even futile to differentiate between representation and simulation when speaking of Las Vegas, the production of hyperreality rests on particular conditions of capitalism inscribing many social and environmental contradictions in the landscape. These contradictions, never fully revealed in a three-day package at a casino-resort, are nevertheless inherent to the production and consumption of Las Vegas as a neon oasis in the desert.

## REFERENCES

- Christensen, J. (2002). Build It and the Water Will Come. In H.K. Rothman and M. Davis (Eds), *The grit beneath the glitter: tales from the real Las Vegas*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Cronon, W. (1996). *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: Norton.
- Eureka County Yucca Mountain Information Office. (2002). Nuclear Waste Update. Available at: [www.yuccamountain.org](http://www.yuccamountain.org).
- Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. (2003). Press & Media. Available at: [www.lasvegas24hours.com/press/faq.html](http://www.lasvegas24hours.com/press/faq.html).
- Liotard, J.F. (1984). The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge. In P. Brooker (Ed), *Modernism/Postmodernism*. London: Longman.
- Moehring, E.P. (2000). *Resort City in the Sunbelt Las Vegas 1930-2000*, second edition. Reno: University of Nevada Press.
- Naturemaker. (2003). Naturemaker Steel Art Trees. Available at: [www.naturemaker.com](http://www.naturemaker.com).
- Parker, R.E. (2002). The Social Costs of Rapid Urbanisation in Southern Nevada. In H.K. Rothman and M. Davis (Eds), *The grit beneath the glitter: tales from the real Las Vegas*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Rothman, H. (2002). Colony, Capital and Casino: Money in the Real Las Vegas. In H.K. Rothman and M. Davis (Eds), *The grit beneath the glitter: tales from the real Las Vegas*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Strolin, J.C. (1989). Nevada and the Nuclear Waste Issue: The Rest of the Story (to date). *Nevada Public Affairs Review*, v. 1. 16-19.
- Wilson, A. (1992). *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to Exxon Valdez*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

