Las Vegas:
The Return of the Repressed

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Aristotle noted that humans seeking productive and fulfilling lives tend to be drawn to cities, where the contexts, boundaries, and qualitative dimensions of their pursuits are defined by continuously evolving ordered systems of meanings and symbols. Within cities acquired patterns of learned social behaviors, otherwise known as culture, become manifest as observable social counterparts of the physical forms of urban environments. Throughout history, evolving cultures, driven by economic and political forces, have tended to become functions of and support systems for the evolution of cities. It was inevitable, therefore, that individual citizens would belong to more than one ordered social system within an established culture, in order to mediate the constraints of a varied, regionalized, monophyletic human condition and attain a degree of personal fulfillment. Some multi-faceted, pluralistic, urban environments were rich in opportunities for the momentary resolution of dichotomies in the lives of their citizens; their material culture provided the context for existential manifestation of their unconstrained desires. As the urban centers of the world became gradually entrapped in a monotonal, corporate labyrinth, however, opportunities for such resolutions were increasingly perceived as dissonant in the inherently inhibited social situations that characterize techno-corporate urban life patterns. The unconscious restraining effect of corporate etiquette on social behavior in a urban culture can, in a Freudian sense, be compared to the unconscious effects of the super-ego on individual behavior. The desire for momentary escape from an anxiety caused by the irreconcilable differences between the individual need for fulfillment (the id) and the conventional demands of the collective culture (the super-ego) is what Freud termed the "return of the repressed." Recognizing this phenomenon, while continuing to colonize across geographic and political borders and realms of cultural consciousness, a growing number of multi-national corporations offer strategic opportunities for the relief of repressed human desires in special themed urban environments, such as the (in)famous city of Las Vegas in Nevada.

It is a psychological axiom that, as the individual's id-driven desires are repressed by the "super-ego"of cultural expectations and norms, the psychic energy that is expended to resist the repressed idea, to keep it out of consciousness, returns in symbolic forms, often in the form of anxiety. In Freud's view, since the cause of this angst is lack of consciousness of one's desires, the cure is to become aware.

The entertainment and gaming facilities that make up the urban core of Las Vegas can be viewed as thinly disguised expressions of that which one represses, and it is this recognition of the forbidden that elicits pleasure and a sense of freedom in their users. According to a recent study profiling Las Vegas visitors,[1] there is a continuously growing subculture of visitors to the city; 33.8 million persons in 1999, a 61% growth since 1990. This subculture shares a singular and complex need to find relief from its anxieties in reassuring themed fantasy environments. Its members are drawn to surroundings that can be characterized as micro-communities of the visitors' Freudian subconsciousness, micro-communities that are as persuasive and mesmerizing in their sensory effects as the so called "virtual reality" of electronic hallucinogenic space, and as reassuring as a Norman Rockwell painting. They are heavily loaded with symbolic images and historical references (false though many are), along with a Freudian appeal to precivilized (id) urges. Visitors are conceptually confined within spaces structured by enticing visual landmarks that both keep crowds oriented and encourage them to explore this opportunity-rich city.

Las Vegas' forbidden, yet familiar, images represent parts of the self and are, thus, "unconsciously attractive." The subtle gradations of designed meanings, when rendered experiential so that they affect the senses and reward the desire of the eyes, can only be understood in relation to the subculture that crystallizes out of the masses around the idea of community. The significance of these meanings may be offering to mass culture an escape from overly-managed and infiltrated work and living spaces, spaces that lack imagery of abundance, physical safety, emotional assurance, and easy access to fortunes. Within a broader socio-economic context, Stuart Ewen expands this view point: "the mass culture is a symbolic acquiescence, by capitalism, to what Freud termed the 'return of the repressed.' "[2] On both psychological and material levels, the perception of community is reinterpreted, at times colonized, for corporate benefit. The creative process of planning and design in Las Vegas is, therefore, a strategy for creating a placebo community, defined as "a physically present human environment that expresses the characteristic rhythmic functional patterns which constitute a culture."[3] Its purpose is to give credible form to the moods and feelings of a connected community life that is only momentary functionally. Although the mass appeal of the products of this creative process is predicated on eliciting responses of the eye and emotions rather than of the intellect, the social impact of these products renders them cultural facts, and, as such, worth pondering.

One such micro-community is the pyramid-shaped, Egyptian-themed, Luxor Resort in Las Vegas. Adam Fine, critic of the *Casino Journal*, writes:

... the wonder of Luxor isn't so much on the casino floor, or in its state of-the-art adventure rides, and cutting edge, "virtual reality," arcade games. Luxor's greatest appeal lies in the remarkable detail that is found throughout the property — in the incredibly detailed reproductions of Egyptian monuments, in the pyramid-shaped lights that adorn the slot machines, in the gilded statues that adorn the casino walls, and in the vivid hieroglyphs that frame the hotel entrance. The reproduced artifacts are faithful to their originals down to the most minute details, and the murals and frescos that adorn the walls and ceilings are of museum quality.[4]

Unlike other themed attractions which often take a more light-hearted approach to their sources of design inspiration, Circus Circus Enterprises, the developers of the Luxor Resort, enlisted the expertise of the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities to ensure that the integrity of ancient relics is preserved in the accuracy of reproductions. The boats trips have now been discontinued, but in the early years of Luxor's operations hundreds of visitors daily cruised the 700-foot-long "River Nile" that traces the perimeter of the pyramidal structure in order to view a scaled-down Tomb of Queen Neferteri, Temple of Isis, and Tomb of Ramses the Second at Abu Sibel. The tour guides' dissertations on the religious and cultural aspects of the shrunken facsimiles of these ancient relics and on their architectural details seemed to give these objects a credible life of their own, confirmed by the admiring expressions on the faces of the viewers.

Ancient architectural form has been fashioned into a mass medium reflecting the dreams, fantasies, and desires of twentieth-century American mass culture. Such architectural forms seem unlikely objets of adaptation by the captains of the consciousness of American mass culture. After all, one associates with these monuments the images of King Tutankhamen and Nubian treasures, not blackjack tables, roulette wheels, and ever-greedy slot machines. Yet, when concepts as alien to each other as these, separated by millenniums and continents, are superimposed, the perception of classical form is suffused with new, subtly different gradations of meaning, if only because the eye and the emotions operate on a far more immediate and primary plane than the intellect.

The Luxor Resort transcends the gaming industry's architectural genre, its metaphysics couched in stunning visual and dramatic terms. It offers very considerable lessons in Egyptian architectural history, while simultaneously shielding its visitors from the world's anxieties. All of this is offered in the context of entertainment, which, of course, makes the Luxor Resort a very specialized environment in which the Las Vegas design strategies of offering placebo effects actually assures some rewards. These specifically include feelings of safety, assurance, and a sense of belonging within a community, but without the demands created by the social obligations and responsibilities typically associated with community. Human needs for feelings of safety and belonging are satisfied by a spectrum of sensory inputs. These evolve from the blending of two common, yet powerful, conceptual threads that permeate the design and planning strategies underlying such formal and cultural essays. Fundamental to these strategies are the abstracting and stylizing of architectural features already familiar to visitors, and the organization of spaces so as to entice visitors to engage in shared activities.

American architecture systematically embodies a preference for familiar images. With respect to themed environments, however, the pursuit of new interpretations of Classical or ancient architectural forms is a direct response to the demands of mass culture for recognizable physical environments in which to discover fleeting moments of identity and pleasure. As Steen Rasmussen has explained:

. . . it is easier to perceive a thing when we know something about it beforehand. We see what is familiar and disregard the rest. That is to say we re-create the observed into something intimate and

comprehensive. This act of re-creation is often carried out by our identifying ourselves with the object by imagining ourselves in its stead. In such instances our activity is more like that of an actor getting the feel of a role than of an artist creating a picture of something he observes outside himself. . . . People looking at pictures have a remarkable ability to enter a role which seems very foreign to them. A weak little man swells with heroism and a zest for life when he sees a Hercules performing daring deeds. . . . The boy with glowing cheeks who sits spellbound over the adventures in a comic strip imagines himself in Tarzan's or Superman's stead.[5]

It is therefore likely that the visitor to Las Vegas will explore enthusiastically the physical expressions of childhood imagination, such as pirate adventures in the Mirage's Treasure Island, or sample the culinary arts of medieval gastronomes in the company of Arthurian knights, storytellers, jugglers and jousters at the Excalibur. A single day's excursion can include a gondola ride in the (second-story) canals of the Venetian followed by café-latte in a bistro at the Paris, all within a mile of one's lodging.

While prominent architects and aestheticians such as Michael Sorkin are becoming increasingly concerned about the "crisis of authenticity" in contemporary architecture, in which they largely perceive meaninglessness, others place their creative talents at the service of consumerism-driven mass culture. In the gestalt that is Las Vegas, notions of authenticity, which often preoccupy purists who seek aesthetic value even in this age of simulation, become irrelevant to perceived meanings. In this context, solidities of meanings are continuously eroding, as a result of the need to create novelty by juxtapositioning formerly disparate concepts; any juxtaposition will generate its own range of sensory input that will satisfy the needs of the visitors' subculture.[6]

A more philosophical point of view is advanced by Walter Benjamin, who argues that the essential element in any work of art is its immediacy, rather than its ability to be "located absolutely in time and space."[7] Consumers, therefore, view but off-prints, not the economic-cultural apparatus by which the off-prints are generated, nor their own position in relation to that apparatus. They have, consequently, only their personal critical abilities with which to draw connections between 'art' and its source. Today, that critical ability may tend to be domesticated; the social style of technological corporatism, and art forms themselves, continually aim at manipulating that ability to criticize, in order to absorb all opposition. The connection between such art and its source may at times be reduced to an epigram of pacified modern life.

Beyond this sense of immediacy, which gives not only art but themed attractions particular value as effective means of nourishing fantasies, are the architecturally defined and organized spaces of the Las Vegas "resort." They are designed to create an intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment, in order to create shared perceptions of experiences and thus of community. These fantasies flourish in part because of, by contrast to reality, the absence of specific knowledge. The knowledge visitors have as participants in events such as gambling or staged spectacles remains limited, selective, and biased by the desire for participating in shared activities. The contexts created by themed environments are purposely structured and designed to be almost mythical, because knowledge requires context in order to have genuine meaning. Fantasies that arise from a perceived ability to acquire wealth by gambling cannot, in these mythological environments, be proven false by evidence of the senses. A visitor does not ask, "Is there a million dollar jackpot? Will it actually be awarded to someone?" These are assumed to be facts, and the problem is perceived as how to devise a plan to acquire the jackpot for oneself.

Many visitors hold tenaciously to the fantasy of winning millions of dollars. Repeated failures to win even modest amounts do not discourage them from continuing their pilgrimages to the Las Vegas casinos. The million dollar jackpots do, in fact, exist and they represent key elements in the complex systems of beliefs fostered by the themed environment.

Such beliefs in turn motivate activities, which, when pursued collectively, provide for the sharing of experiences that, through temporary commonalty of purpose, take on characteristics of community.

The physical settings of these pseudo-communities are designed and planned so that they may become conceptual extensions of already familiar spatial meanings derived from direct experience. The visitors' imaginations are led by their surroundings to construct ultimate fantasy environments that may bear little or no relationship to reality. Irving Hallowell remarked about this phenomenon, "Perhaps the most striking feature of man's spatialization of this world is the fact that it never appears to be exclusively limited to the pragmatic level of action and perpetual experience."[8] As inaccurate and phantasmagorical as these placebo communities may be, they seem in some way to be "necessary to the sense of reality of one's empirical world."[9]

Environments such as the Luxor Resort respond to the needs of the mass culture, as identified by Freud. They become repositories of memories and dreams, and constitute opportunities for the fulfillment, in fantasy, of wishes that in real life are frustrated either by external obstacles or by moral inhibitions.[10] They succeed on this level because they "create the semblance of that World which is counterpart of a Self."[11] Furthermore, they provide not only for personal selfhood, but also for a collective selfhood on a community scale. They are designed to give perceptible form to moods, feelings, and the life of the psyche. They create a potent symbiosis of images and meanings that provide the experiential basis of perceived value. The complexity, even the numerous confusions, heard in countless parables of visitors finding their counterparts in a replica of a royal tomb in an ancient Egyptian pyramidal form located in the Nevada desert, may sound stilted or pretentious when considered within the conceptual framework of philosophical conventions. Yet, for all their distracting properties and their tendency to encapsulate the wilderness of human nature in Freudian and possibly metaphysical terms, the Luxor Resort and similar themed attractions are never stilted or pretentious. In the final analysis, they are *sui generis,* environments that establish an entirely new frame of reference for themselves, and therefore for their visitors, in which aesthetic value can only be defined experientially in relation to feeling.

NOTES

[1] GLS, Research, *1999 Las Vegas Visitor Profile Study* (Las Vegas: Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, 1999).

[2] Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976), 200.

[3] S. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 96.

[4] Adam Fine,"Secrets of the Pyramids," *Casino Journal.* 6(1993): 32.

[5] Steen Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture* (Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1991), 36.

[6] Peter Noever, "Nineteen Millennial Mantras," *Architecture in Transition* (Munich: Prestel, 1991), 107.

[7] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1968), 217-251.

[8] Irving Hallowell, *Culture and Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,1955), 187.

[9] Y. Tuan, *Space and Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 88.

[10] Sigmund Freud, *Formulations on the Two Principles Mental Functioning* (London: Hogarth Press, 1911), 224.

[11] S. Langer, *op. cit.,* 98.