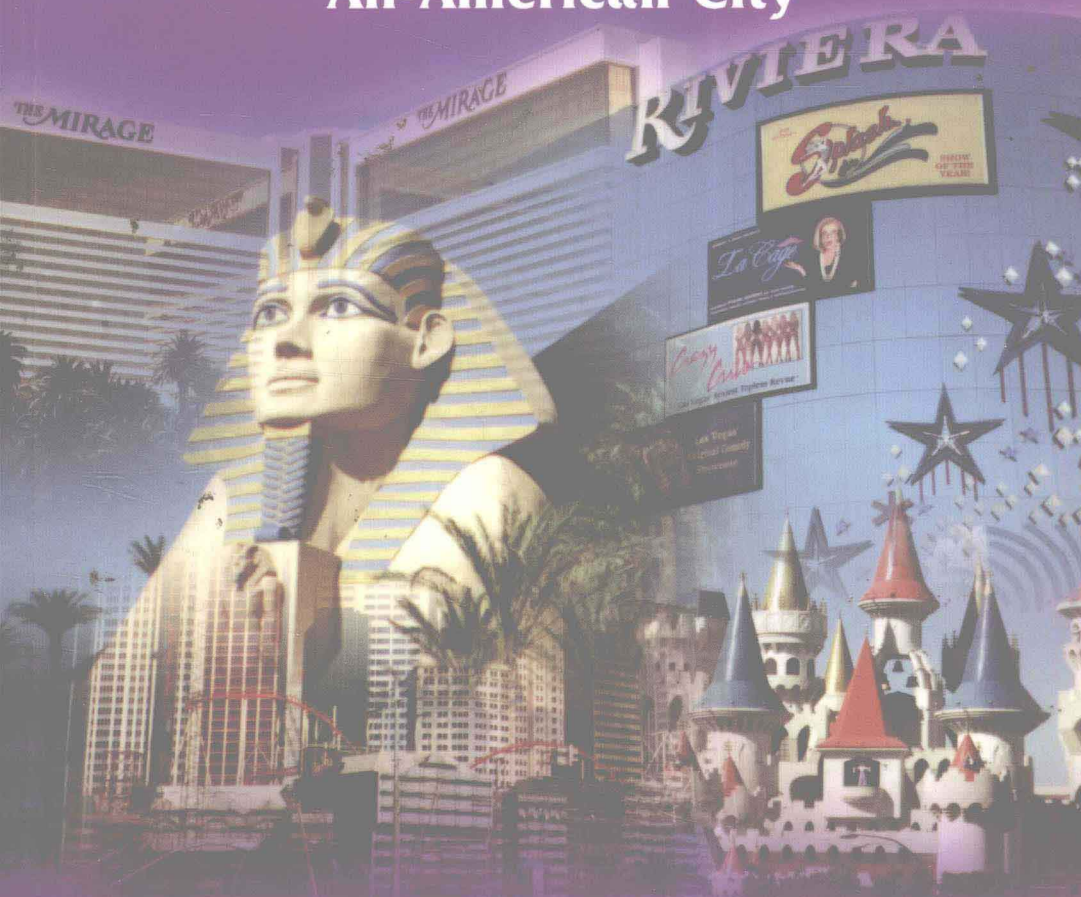
Las Vegas

The Social Production of an All-American City



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Preface

This book concerns Las Vegas, a town about which almost everyone has an opinion, most often derived from tourist visits or mass media images on television and in Hollywood films. For many, Las Vegas is "Sin City" or "Lost Wages," a glitzy fantasy town devoted entirely to gambling and entertainment. Without denying the continuing salience of Las Vegas' image as a tourist mecca, our primary focus here lies elsewhere: on what we term the normalization of the Las Vegas area, its development into a fully fledged metropolitan region with a growing number of permanent residents whose everyday life involves concerns that mirror those of other large Sunbelt cities.

At the same time, this is also a book about the rest of America, insofar as we argue that in many ways Las Vegas represents, though often in exaggerated form, several important trends in contemporary American society as a whole. Some of these new trends are political-economic in nature, such as the prominent role of what Henri Lefebvre refers to as "the second circuit of capital," i.e., real estate investment, in driving urban development and supporting contemporary urban elites. Others are more cultural, including the spread of legal gambling across the country and the increasing reliance of older metropolitan areas on tourism, with the accompanying use of Las Vegas-style boosterism to attract visitors. In this sense, we argue that Las Vegas is more avant-garde than aberrant, albeit in ways that are not always particularly positive, but which nonetheless demand serious study by scholars of contemporary urban life.

Certainly we are not the first to put forth such an argument. The first and perhaps still the most famous commentary on the broader cultural significance of Las Vegas is Tom Wolfe's discussion of the town in *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965). Noting that the important thing about Las Vegas is not that its builders were gangsters but that they were working class, Wolfe goes on to argue that:

> long after Las Vegas' influence as a gambling heaven has gone, Las Vegas' forms and symbols will be influencing American life. ... Las Vegas' neon sculpture, its fantastic fifteen-story high display signs, parabolas,

> boomerangs, rhomboids, trapezoids and all the rest of it, are already the staple design of the American landscape outside of the oldest part of the oldest cities. . . . They are the new landmarks of America, the new guideposts, the new way Americans get their bearings. (1965: viii)

Nearly as significant in its impact, at least in certain academic circles, was the celebration of Las Vegas-style architecture in the late 1960s by the Yale architects, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour (1972). Promoting what they saw as Las Vegas' vibrant, populist celebration of postwar American mass culture as an antidote to the sterile formalism of high modernist design, the Yale architects urged their colleagues to "learn from Las Vegas."

More recently, still others have commented on Las Vegas' role as a pioneer of sorts in regard to new national trends (see Findlay 1990; Hess 1993). Architectural critic Alan Hess in particular has provided an update of Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's classic work, chronicling more recent developments in what he refers to as Las Vegas' commercial vernacular style, which, he argues, has "catapulted Las Vegas to the leading edge of American urbanism" (1993: 114).

None of these observers, however, have tried to document the point sociologically, as we do here, by means of an in-depth analysis of the region and the tremendous changes it has recently undergone. This book, therefore, is not about Las Vegas, or "Vegas," the seedy gambling haven for adults, but about the area as a developing metropolitan region of permanent residents with an enviable quality of life. In chapter 1 we provide an historical overview of the development of Las Vegas from its origins as a sleepy railroad town through its emergence in the decades following World War II as a major tourist destination. We also analyze this development in terms of a relatively recent approach in urban sociology, the socio-spatial model, which is a regional approach that emphasizes capital investment in real estate and the actions of powerful elites.

In chapter 2 we discuss the most recent era in Las Vegas' history, characterized by the advent of giant megaresorts and the prominence of multinational corporate ownership. Chapter 3 describes the origins and development of Las Vegas' glitzy image, focusing especially on the role of advertising and other forms of media hype in creating that image. One factor that is especially relevant here is the melding of the get-rich-quick glamor of gambling with that of Hollywood celebrities. As a location, Las Vegas promises a new, spectacular form of happiness and entertainment.

In chapter 4 we examine the advent of development on a regional scale, detailing the metropolis's explosive population growth as well as its booming economy. While the region has become more diverse

racially and ethnically, and has attracted a large influx of senior citizens, questions are raised concerning its continued heavy reliance on gambling.

Chapters 5 and 6 address a central theme of the book: the transformation of Las Vegas from a predominantly tourist town of transients into a diverse region that also contains a growing number of residential communities with conventional families and suburban lifestyles. In chapter 5 we focus especially on the development of master-planned communities and other new suburban areas whose residents have formed local identities largely removed from the glitz and glitter of gambling and tourism. We also raise the crucial question of the effects of uneven development on class and racial inequality as well as on spatial growth patterns. In chapter 6 we continue our discussion of the normalization process in Las Vegas by examining the region's emerging civic culture as manifested by its public activities in libraries, parks, churches, and educational institutions.

Chapter 7 provides a portrait of everyday life in Las Vegas, emphasizing the colorful contradictions of living in what is both a typical Sunbelt metropolis and a 24-hour entertainment town. In chapter 8 we focus on the unusual nature of local politics and the impact of a variety of community concerns such as growth, inequality, education, and the environment on the local political agenda. It is the change in this agenda that best characterizes normalization.

Finally, in chapter 9, we offer a summary evaluation of our thesis that Las Vegas is becoming a more typical American city, while the rest of the country is changing in ways that make it more like Las Vegas. We conclude by discussing a list of some of the problematic aspects of growth and the growing contradiction that lies at the very heart of normalization, between a politics based on promoting the interests of business and the need for government that better serves the needs of the increasing number of residents. In so doing we hope to encourage readers to look past the neon façade that has traditionally defined Las Vegas and appreciate the dynamics of community formation in its midst.

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1 From Desert Oasis to Glitter Capital of the World

Las Vegas, Nevada, is located in the middle of one of the most forbidding deserts on earth. It is a most unlikely place for a city, yet, in 1995, the population of the Las Vegas metropolitan region passed one million and Nevada's state demographer predicts a population of two million for the Las Vegas Valley by 2007. The average annual temperature is 66.3 degrees Fahrenheit, but after May relentless heat sears the summer months. There is little variation in temperature once the hot weather arrives, at midnight in July the temperature can be 90 degrees. Millions of gallons of water must be pumped uphill each day to Las Vegas from nearby Lake Mead and most other necessities such as food, clothing, building supplies, and construction equipment must be transported in from other states. How this improbable metropolis developed in the midst of such a forbidding environment hundreds of miles from any large urban center is truly a remarkable story.

The Early Days

One of the key issues in urban analysis is to explain how land acquires value through location. While agricultural land derives value from its intrinsic worth as a natural resource, city land derives value from its location. The area of southern Nevada within which Las Vegas is located possesses no intrinsic worth as an agricultural resource. Even today the Bureau of Land Management classifies most of the area surrounding Las Vegas as arid wasteland. In the 1800s, however, the region was highly valued as a site of mineral deposits, especially gold, bringing the first Europeans to the area, although the Paiute Native American tribe had lived in the region for centuries.

The Las Vegas site also had one other precious resource. Water regularly bubbled up through the ground from artesian wells. Prior to the 1820s, those few hearty souls seeking to go west followed a trail carved out by the early Spanish explorers between what is now New

Mexico and California. The Old Spanish Trail stayed close to water, following the Colorado River south and then due west below the Mojave Desert to the Pacific Ocean. This L-shaped trail was the easiest but not the most direct path, so explorers searched for a quicker route. In November 1829, a sixty-man merchant party led by the Spanish explorer and trader Antonio Armijo, and his scout, Rafael Rivera, discovered a verdant oasis while searching for water midway on their trip. They named the site Las Vegas, the Meadows, and it proved to be a valuable alternative to the longer trail by cutting days off the journey west. As one historian observed: "The abundant artesian spring water at Las Vegas shortened the Spanish Trail to Los Angeles and eased the rigors for the traders who used the route" (*Las Vegas Review-Journal* 1989: 19A). Others, such as the fur trapper Jedediah Smith, soon used the route to reach California. Without its naturally occurring ground water, the early settlement of Las Vegas never would have begun.

By the 1850s, the Utah-to-California route via Las Vegas was so well established that Congress created a regular mail run between Salt Lake City and San Diego (Moehring 1989: 1). A significant Anglo population moved into the area for the first time when a Mormon expedition from Utah arrived. After establishing the city of San Bernardino at the east end of the Los Angeles basin, the Mormons "put in a settlement at Las Vegas to supply travelers going to and from San Bernardino and Salt Lake City" (Moehring 1989: 2). They also constructed an adobe fort near what is now the city's downtown. Consequently, Las Vegas became an early general provision site in the expanding settlement of the southwest.

In the 1860s gold strikes in the vicinity of Las Vegas, at Mt Potosi north of town and another in Eldorado Canyon, drew prospectors already working the gold fields of California and northern Nevada. As gold seekers streamed into the Las Vegas area, the city's role as a center for provisions expanded, bringing others who cashed in not by mining directly but by catering to the needs of prospectors. In the 1860s, for example, a former prospector named Octavius Gass took over the old fort abandoned by earlier Mormon settlers and converted it into a large general store and ranch. This building anchored the town's early settlement. He also bought a large abandoned farm site and founded the Las Vegas Ranch, which was cultivated until the early 1900s. By the turn of the century, the real gold of the West, the railroads, came to the region, as the presence of ample water attracted Las Vegas railroad entrepreneurs who were already engaged in developing Los Angeles.

A Montana copper baron turned senator and real-estate speculator, William Clark, arrived on the scene in 1902. By then it was widely rec-

ognized that the most cost-efficient route between Los Angeles and Salt Lake City was through Las Vegas (Moehring 1989: 3). Clark built the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad, that connected the Union Pacific main line in Utah with southern California. Like other venture capitalists who built railroads, he also speculated in real estate, building homesites in the Las Vegas area alongside the new railroad (Gottdiener 1994a). Huge fortunes were made as these enterprises worked successfully in tandem, attracting large numbers of people to settlements in sparsely populated areas of the western United States.

On May 15, 1905, Clark's townsite officially became the city of Las Vegas. The dusty main drag was named "Fremont Street" after the famous "pathfinder," explorer John C. Fremont, who popularized the area, not Antonio Armijo, the Spanish trader whose party first discovered it. Clark's railroad auctioned off 1,200 town lots plotted by the company, many to wealthy businessmen from Los Angeles who were active at the auction. Corner lots in the town went for $150 to $750 and inside lots for $100 to $500, both considerable sums at the time (Paher 1971). The early town was nothing more than a tent city, a dusty desert depot housing trading companies and the railroad office, but in 1909 Las Vegas became the county seat, giving the site an important government connection. The state legislature named the new county after Clark.

Las Vegas grew slowly during its first decades, with warehousing and distribution as its main economic functions. Gambling was legal at first, as it was in many towns throughout the West. But the state of Nevada, under intense pressure from reformers, passed a stringent anti-gambling law in 1910. All forms of gambling became illegal, even including the western custom of flipping a coin to see who paid for drinks. Despite the law, however, illegal gambling continued to flourish in the city until new legislation in 1931 made it legal once again.

During this time Las Vegas had become a major provisioning site for traders and merchants traveling to and from California and a transshipment depot for mining operation supplies. A new railroad spur served the mining towns of Tonopah, Rhyolite and Bullfrog and converged with Clark's San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake line at Fremont Street. The area around the depot also became the city's downtown.

In 1905 Charles P. "Pop" Squires built a tent hotel at the intersection of Main and Stewart streets to house the visitors who came for the auctions. Two other crude hotels followed, the Overland Hotel (presently the site of the Las Vegas Club) and Hotel Nevada (presently the site of the Golden Gate), both located across from the railroad depot. Plentiful artesian wells in the area attracted real-estate specula-

tors, who began to develop the surrounding land for homesteads. City leaders interested in promoting growth adopted a commission style of government, one of the Progressive reforms that would foster an image of Las Vegas as a "good government" city. At the same time, the reality of a wide open, free-wheeling town was already well established, contradicting the prim image of Progressivism. As one observer noted:

> Since 1905, the town's boisterous clubs had played host to thousands of railroad passengers on train layovers. By railroad order, the sale of intoxicating liquors was limited to Blocks 16 and 17, a zone conveniently located on Fremont Street near the railroad station. Within a few years of the town's founding, the area had evolved into a red-light district as well. (Moehring 1989: 11)

Later, in 1942, Block 16 prostitution was eliminated by the city at the request of the War Department because a military base had been established in the area. The city accomplished this first by raids and then by refusing to approve new business and liquor licenses for the bars, that often doubled as brothels.

Boom and Bust

The cities of the southwest grew in a manner that contrasts with those on the East Coast or in the Midwest. Created with little population and a limited infrastructure, they had to attract people and resources in order to grow. Great risks have always been part of the equation in southwest development as most business initiatives were of the speculative kind. If they worked, fortunes could be made. If they failed, however, they added to the stock of abandoned dreams that still dot the landscape throughout the arid regions in the southwest.

Las Vegas' development has been typical of this boom and bust cycle. In the early 1900s a boom period came with the discovery of gold nearby, and speculators like William Clark cashed in on real estate and railroad development. By 1919, however, mining activity in the region declined and Las Vegas languished as a lonely way station in the desert.

The Paradigm Shift in Urban Sociology

Urban sociologists have traditionally analyzed the process of city development by using East Coast or Midwestern cities as examples. In