



Las Vegas is under siege. Even as the city in the desert flourishes, its long-standing critics are determined to deride it as a constructed reality that indefensibly purges his-

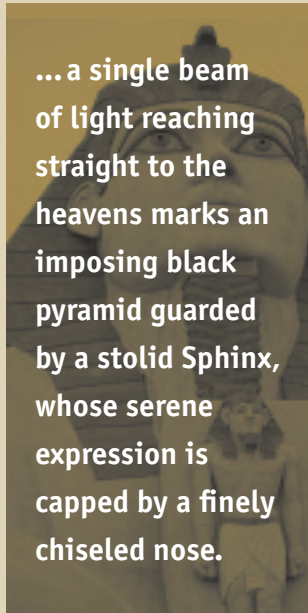
tory and culture from its sterile landscape. As we explored the concept of reality and its social significance in Dr. Kristin Solli's Writing 20 seminar, "Authenticity and Artifice," I was disturbed to find the city relentlessly cited in essays and articles as a prime example of the superficial nature of contemporary society, in which "reality" is tailored to fit the particular expectations and desires of the consumer. Though it was easy to understand this critical perspective, it seemed to me that such arguments neglected the essence of the Las Vegas experience. In a society where authenticity has become as essential to a product as safety and value, why does Las Vegas continue to be such a popular tourist destination? In trying to answer that question, first for the captive audience of my seminar class and then for the wider community, I was challenged to encapsulate in concrete terms the nebulous ideas that so often darted shapelessly to the forefront of my consciousness and retreated, indistinct, before I had managed to grasp them. Seizing hold of these ideas long enough to fully examine them was a demanding process, and I muddled my way through several ambiguous drafts before a tightly-crafted thesis finally emerged. Though the critics are not entirely wrong, they are not exactly right, either—a fluidity of two opposing concepts echoes the mutability of reality itself.

# Gondolas in the Desert: Searching for Authenticity in Las Vegas

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 Professor Kristin Solli

Eagerly glimpsed from an airplane window seat as night falls in Nevada, it is only a tiny pinprick of light set against the vast black desert of the American Southwest. Up close, the towering hotels and casinos that line Las Vegas Boulevard bewilder the senses with dazzling neon lights and lavish architecture, fantastic in design and overwhelming in scale. As is so often the case, traffic on the choked boulevard, known in the local vernacular as the Strip, has slowed to a halt. While locals take pains to avoid this four-mile stretch of gridlock, the snail's pace affords eager tourists the opportunity to take in every last detail of the landscape; and for the newly initiated, the spectacle rarely disappoints. At Caesar's Palace, where oversized statues of gods and goddesses bid gamblers welcome at the marble entrance, the venerable Roman Coliseum suggests the glorious battles of the ancients, while down the street an imposing bronze lion before the MGM Grand evokes the Hollywood glamour of a bygone era. Venice's Piazza San Marco erupts from the sand, complete with bridges arching gracefully across a canal dotted with gondoliers who croon to young couples snuggling together against the chill of the desert night air. Across the street, the fountains before a grand Italian villa leap and twirl in captivating dance. At the far end of the Strip, a single beam of light reaching straight to the heavens marks an imposing black pyramid guarded by a stolid Sphinx, whose serene expression is capped by a finely chiseled nose.



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Las Vegas has always infuriated critics of a Prohibitionist tendency who brand the city as a dark abyss of gambling and depravity, a long-standing reputation which Sin City has alternately flaunted with pride and attempted to obscure. More recently, a new type of social critic has launched a sustained attack on the city as a sort of black hole into which history and culture are inexorably sucked, to be regurgitated along Las Vegas Boulevard in a hodgepodge of hotels and casinos borrowing lurid, falsified images from other "real" places and epochs in a poorly-conceived effort at authenticity. While no cultural anthropologist would turn to Paris Las Vegas to study French culture, and no archaeologist examine the Excalibur as an example of medieval castle architecture, the almost 40 million people who flock to the Strip each year suggest that the so-called artificiality of Las Vegas demands closer analysis. If Sin City has become the Fake City, why do tourists so eagerly clog its streets and sidewalks in lieu of pursuing more authentic experiences elsewhere? The com-



**Figure 1.** The “authentic” Ponte Rialto and Doge’s Palace in Venice, Italy (photos by Jiana Menendez).

mon conceptions of Las Vegas need to be revisited. Perhaps there is more to the city than its critics suggest; perhaps the superficial quality of the Strip’s flamboyant neon lights and constructed landscape belies a more complex social desire. Too many critics’ arguments merely recognize authenticity and artifice as conceptual opposites, disavowing the nuanced forms that reality can assume. A closer look at the City of Lights reveals that it is perhaps not authenticity for its own sake, but the particular version of authenticity which Las Vegas offers, that keeps tourists returning again and again to this glittering patch of sand in the desert.

### Out of the Sands

Las Vegas is a city arguably founded upon artifice, so contrived that the desert landscape had to literally be reshaped in order to bring together the necessary elements for human habitation. Originally a tiny wayside station on the trail from Utah to California, and completely unremarkable save for the natural springs that brought water up from deep underground, the settlement drew the attention of prospectors in California and northern Nevada when gold deposits were discovered in the 1860s. To support the town’s growing population, in the 1930s the Hoover Dam was built to draw extra water off the Colorado River. This redirection of hundreds of cubic meters of water created Lake Mead, the largest

man-made reservoir in the United States, which today supplies precious water to the arid region (Parker 48).

In a series of landscape reinventions, Las Vegas went from a mob-controlled cluster of shady casinos and prostitution rings to a highly profitable set of corporate-owned enterprises offering visitors the ultimate escape from reality and a chance—however statistically remote—to win big at the gaming tables. Clearly, from a historian’s perspective, the critics have it right: Las Vegas is, and always has been, a phony locality, a town whose prospects have always relied more on shady business dealings and money-making schemes than on a rich base of natural resources. From its very origins, Las Vegas appears to be a suspiciously inauthentic place.

How then do we explain the allure of the Strip today? Are tourists simply unaware that the city is a sham? Perhaps we have been deceived by a well-designed façade into believing that a trip up the Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas can justly be characterized as an “authentic” experience. Yet the city’s abundance of caricatures, from the busty waitresses at Caesar’s Palace clad in low-cut togas to the singing, dancing statues of Roman gods at the Forum Shops, make this theory rather difficult to believe. Surely someone must have noticed that the nose of the Sphinx lounging before the Luxor appears quite intact, or that the chilly evening breeze on a gondola ride feels a bit



**Figure 2.** The “artificial” versions of Doge’s Palace and the Ponte Rialto in Las Vegas, Nevada (photos by Whitney Soble).

removed from the warm Mediterranean climate of southern Italy. Perhaps the biggest blow to this theory, however, comes from the city itself: authenticity, it loudly proclaims, is decidedly not a part of the Las Vegas experience.

### When in Vegas...

In what will surely be remembered as one of the most successful advertising campaigns in marketing history, the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority has purchased for the city a measure of pop culture immortality in the form of the suggestive tagline: “What happens here, stays here.” The men and women featured in the accompanying set of commercials by advertising agency R&R Partners take their Las Vegas vacation as not merely an enjoyable getaway, but an opportunity to invent a new reality. In one ad, two women at a nightclub slip into a restroom to swap wigs before returning to the dance floor (“Nightclub”); in another, a young man woos a variety of women at Vegas bars with such off-hand remarks as, “Well, the technical term for what I do is neurosurgery... I’m a brain doctor,” and “I’m a racecar driver... Formula Two—er, One” (“Be Anyone”). In perhaps the most literal interpretation of this theme, an attractive young woman slides into a limousine headed for the airport and flirts with the driver, her dark hair tumbling down around her shoulders; upon arriving at the airport, she emerges

in a business suit, her hair pulled back into an austere knot, and speaking rapidly into her cell phone in a clipped British accent (“Mistress of Disguise”). The meaning of the advertising campaign’s slogan could not be clearer. By merely packing our bags and heading to Las Vegas, we can become the people we have always secretly wanted to be—exciting, fun, uninhibited, interesting—giving into our temptations and experimenting with our preconceived notions of reality. At home, at work, in the community, with friends or co-workers, we are compelled to conform to social expectations. Mistakes and indiscretions have their ramifications. But in Las Vegas, the ads assert, we have no responsibilities, no one watching over our shoulders—we are free to become whomever we please and behave accordingly, because after all, what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.

The advertisements, launched in January 2003, were an immediate and overwhelming success. The new Las Vegas tagline assumed an enviable position

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in the popular vernacular, garnering acknowledgement from such notables as actor Billy Crystal and first lady Laura Bush, and topped the lists of the most popular product ads on television. According to an impact study of previous leisure visitors, 80 percent of viewers held favorable impressions of the ads, and 73 percent expressed heightened interest in traveling to Las Vegas. And the campaign not only affected the consumer psyche, but—more importantly for the tourism bureau—influenced how people chose to allocate their financial resources. In 2004, Las Vegas played host to an additional 460,000 visitors over the previous year and boasted an average occupancy of 85 percent, compared to the national average of 59 percent (R&R Partners, Inc.). Clearly, viewers were buying into the notion that when it comes to Las Vegas, all bets are off and anything can happen—exactly the image which the city had hoped to sell to consumers.

At first blush, the advertisements seem to declare what no other tourist site would dare suggest: that the city is fake to the point of being unreal, that visitors can feel free to do as they please, because “what happened in Vegas” did not really happen at all. However, such an analysis misses the real point of the slogan: that Las Vegas is not exactly an unreality, or even an artificial version of reality, but an alternate reality which invites visitors to indulge in the pleasures and vices which societal codes forbid us in our everyday lives. The advertisements are not meant to suggest that the temptations of Las Vegas are false, any more than they would imply that the slot machines at the casinos are rigged, or that our hopes of striking it rich at the blackjack table are empty dreams. Instead, they nudge us to act out our fantasies—ill-conceived whirlwind marriages in tacky wedding chapels presided over by a pudgy Elvis, for example, or a turn on the bar at Coyote Ugly, just like in the movie—in an environment which evokes reality but is entirely divorced from its consequences. The ads insist, “It’s real—but we won’t tell your coworkers about it.”

### **Designing a Fake City**

Even if we concede that the Las Vegas experience might be about more than pure fantasy, a troublesome question remains: can a town whose most defining structures are actually imitations of other edifices be considered authentic? Architect and social critic Ada Louise Huxtable takes a critical view of the matter, deriding the New York New York Hotel and

Casino as “a crowd-pleaser without the risk of a trip to the Big Apple” (8). As she argues in her book *The Unreal America: Architecture and Illusion*, “serious architecture” in today’s society has become “sidelined, trivialized, reduced to a decorative art or a developer’s gimmick, [and] characterized by a pastiche of borrowed styles and shaky, subjective references” such as are found at every turn in Las Vegas and other entertainment complexes (9). Huxtable is not alone in this view; author and philosophy professor Nathan Radke of Sheridan College in Ontario points out that hotels like the Venetian and Paris Las Vegas “are designed to emulate historical European cities, while still allowing American tourists to enjoy a European-free environment... Painstaking measures have been taken to ensure accuracy, although there is no raw sewage floating down the canals of the Venetian in the desert.” Their verdict: Las Vegas can be viewed only as a cheap and unsophisticated imitation of Paris, ancient Rome, New York, and other places and eras. Huxtable declares in particular that the architecture of each hotel and casino employs a tacky caricature of representative styles—superficial decorations without an underlying purpose except gratification of the masses. Her assessment of the New York, New York as the Big Apple devoid of the unpleasant attendant dangers of a real metropolis is echoed by Radke, who notes that each edifice sanitizes what might otherwise be considered a more “authentic” New York City or Venice, reproducing à la carte only those elements which are tasteful and desirable and avoiding such disagreeable features as filthy canal water and Europeans. In both arguments, the authenticity of New York City and Venice themselves remains unquestioned, providing standards against which the legitimacy of Las Vegas may be measured.

Yet if the Las Vegas Strip is really nothing more than an amalgam of references to other places, with no meriting characteristics of its own, the question we must ask is—why go there at all? Why might one choose to visit Paris Las Vegas, the Luxor, or the Venetian instead of France, Egypt, or Italy? Although the city’s domestic location and consequent lack of language and currency barriers lend it an edge over these foreign destinations, the sheer numbers in which people flock to the Strip suggests that a perfect replication of these more “authentic” locales is not what the average Las Vegas tourist has in mind; that, contrary to Huxtable’s and Radke’s assumptions, an imitation—even an imperfect one—can still be meaningful in its own right.

Perhaps, then, visitors do not enter the Venetian expecting it to be Venice, but to delight instead in the hotel and casino's particular interpretation of that city. These tourists regard with satisfaction elements which Huxtable would undoubtedly consider tacky, like tiny indoor "waterfront" cafés overlooking a three-foot-deep Grand Canal and a Piazza San Marco offering Louis Vuitton and Versace boutiques. We may therefore consider such establishments not just in the context of the places they emulate, but as their own "places" with their own architectural styles, cultural references, and societal expectations. Paris Las Vegas then is aptly named, for it is not just an attempt to recreate the French capital, but to reinvent it—with a Vegas flair.

Of course, Las Vegas is many things to many people; this was the essence of the 2003 advertising campaign, which played to "different audience[s] based on ages, demographics and various overindulging behaviors" with a purposely vague tagline. Every Las Vegas tourist possesses his or her own "specific fantasies, experiences, expectations and assumptions" (R&R Partners, Inc.), and for at least some, the allure of Las Vegas may well be the sanitized versions of New York City and Venice that Huxtable and Radke describe. To end the analysis there, however, is to ignore the deeper significance of the Strip's widespread appeal. Las Vegas does not suffer from an "inauthentic" version of reality, because the city's allure does not stem from its capacity to perfectly reproduce the Trevi Fountain or the Trocadéro. Rather, it is precisely the Strip's exquisite ability to merely suggest reality, to approximate these well-known places and eras in an unlikely desert locale, which creates the necessary tension for such a mischievous tagline. From this broadened perspective, it becomes clear that the merits of the Strip's hotels and casinos are more appropriately evaluated as free-standing "places" of their own reality, rather than against the cities they emulate, as Huxtable and Radke suggest.

### **Imitation as Authentication**

An important implication of Huxtable's and Radke's arguments is that Las Vegas must always be a poor imitation of the places it emulates because an original is always inherently more "authentic." Any attempt at simulation or replication thereby reinforces the authenticity of the latter and the inadequacies of the former. To approach the question of the Strip's authenticity from an entirely different perspective, perhaps then the strongest evidence yet of Las Vegas's ascension from mere simulation to full-fledged self-actuality is at San Diego's Legoland, which in March 2007 opened its own miniature replica of the Las Vegas Strip. The attraction features ten of Las Vegas Boulevard's grandest hotels

and includes an exploding volcano in front of the Mirage and "two iconic structures of Paris Las Vegas, the balloon sign and Eiffel Tower," as well as "a miniature wedding chapel, monorails and real life sounds recorded in Las Vegas." The promotional advertisements eagerly bill the replica Strip as an authentic recreation down which visitors will walk "with models of the famous buildings rising above them on either side to recreate the feeling of walking next to the actual massive entertainment complexes" (Legoland California).

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That the Eiffel Tower has become such a mainstay of the Strip skyline that it could be called an iconic structure of the hotel and casino that in turn borrowed it from Paris should testify to the solidification of the city's position as an imitation that has achieved the status of an original. In Legoland, no pretense is made that the New York New York or the Venetian are replicas of more authentic places; here they have become genuine in their own right, worthy of imitation on their own merit rather than substandard facsimiles of the more authentic originals. The Eiffel Tower has become just at home in miniature proportion on the Strip skyline as it is towering over the ancient buildings that line the Seine in one of the world's most historic cities. If imitation, so often billed as the sincerest form of flattery, also indicates the original's authenticity, then Las Vegas can hardly be considered only an artificial simulation of the truly authentic.

### **A New Perspective**

The city of Las Vegas has thrived since its days as a wayside station for travelers in the early West, and today ranks as one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. Critics dismiss the city, however, as little more than a sanitized version of reality which plays to the desires, prejudices, and expectations of the tourist. The allure of Las Vegas is undeniable; but a closer look at the wild success of the latest marketing strategies, and of its themed hotels and casinos despite their architectural and historical inaccuracies, has demonstrated that the true appeal of the Las Vegas experience is significantly more complex than these critics allow. The attraction does not stem from a desire on the part of tourists for a

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recreated authenticity as defined by other, more "real" places. Instead, Las Vegas fulfills an existing social desire by providing an alternate reality in which to act out socially prohibited or otherwise unacceptable fantasies, along with the guarantee so artfully implied in its tagline that the consequences of one's decisions in Sin City will not affect "real" reality.

Of course, one may argue that gambling, regardless of the authenticity debate, has always been the real incentive for a trip to Las Vegas; and it was in the days before the modern corporate-owned megacasinos. These days, however, tourists are in search of more than a blackjack table and a slot machine. After all, gambling can be organized in any common saloon; why do so many prefer to take their chips to Vegas? It is interesting to note that of the many on-screen advertisements produced for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, none explicitly use the gaming floors as a selling point. Instead, they draw on the Strip's vast array of bars, nightclubs, and restaurants, generally as venues for questionable or irregular behaviors.

And yet Las Vegas hotels and casinos go beyond merely fostering an active nightlife, creating massive complexes designed to emulate exciting destinations and epochs. Such casinos, including the Venetian and Paris Las Vegas, two of the most explicitly referential hotels on the Strip, enhance the sense of hedonism because the glimmering canals and tiny crêpe stands create a tension which is essential to the fantasy. These microcosms of the real world strike an exquisite balance between authenticity and artifice that emphasizes the fluidity of the two concepts—a notion which Huxtable and Radke cannot accept because their own perspectives reduce a very complex truth to a simple binary. Such critiques of Las Vegas make their fundamental error in failing to recognize that the Strip's imperfect version of reality is not its greatest shortcoming, but precisely the quality which lures hordes of tourists to its casinos, bars, and nightclubs in search of clandestine flirtations with the forbidden. ■

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