

More on Vegas

VAST SPACE IN THE HISTORICAL TRADITION AND AT THE A&P

The A&P parking lot is a current phase in the evolution of vast space since Versailles (Fig. 12). The space that divides high-speed highway and low, sparse buildings produces no enclosure and little direction. To move through a piazza is to move between high enclosing forms. To move through this landscape is to move over vast expansive texture: the megatexture of the commercial landscape. The parking lot is the *parterre* of the asphalt landscape (Fig. 13). The patterns of parking lines give direction much as the paving patterns, curbs, borders, and *tapis vert* give direction in Versailles; grids of lamp posts substitute for obelisks, rows of urns and statues as points of identity and continuity in the vast space. But it is the highway signs, through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, their particular positions in space, their inflected shapes, and their graphic meanings, that identify and unify the megatexture. They make verbal and symbolic connections through space, communicating a complexity of meanings through hundreds of associations in a few seconds from far away. Symbol dominates space. Architecture is not enough. Because the spatial relationships are made by symbols more than by forms, architecture in this landscape becomes symbol in space rather than form in space. Architecture defines very little: The big sign and the little building is the rule of Route 66.

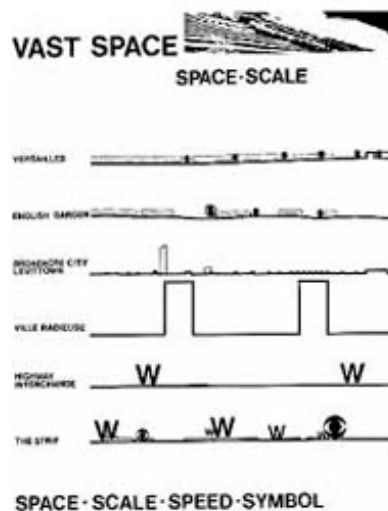


figure12. A comparative analysis of vast spaces



figure 13. Aladdin Casino and Hotel, Las Vegas

The sign is more important than the architecture. This is reflected in the proprietor's budget. The sign at the front is a vulgar extravaganza, the building at the back, a modest necessity. The architecture is what is cheap. Sometimes the building is the sign: The duck store in the shape of a duck, called "The Long Island Duckling," (Figs. 14, 15) is sculptural symbol and architectural shelter. Contradiction between outside and inside was common in architecture before the Modern movement, particularly in urban and monumental architecture (Fig. 16). Baroque domes were symbols as well as spatial constructions, and they are bigger in scale and higher outside than inside in order to dominate their urban setting and communicate their symbolic message. The false fronts of Western stores did the same thing: They were bigger and taller than the interiors they fronted to communicate the store's importance and to enhance the quality and unity of the street. But false fronts are of the order and scale of Main Street. From the desert town on the highway in the West of today, we can learn new and vivid lessons about an impure architecture of communication. The little low buildings, gray-brown like the desert, separate and recede from the street that is now the highway, their false fronts disengaged and turned perpendicular to the highway as big, high signs. If you take the signs away, there is no place. The desert town is intensified communication along the highway.

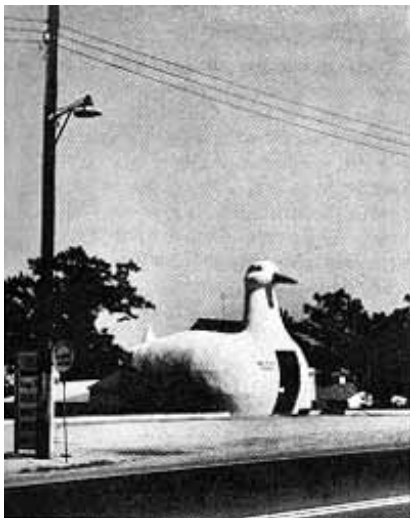


figure14. "The Long Island Duckling" from God's Own Junkyard

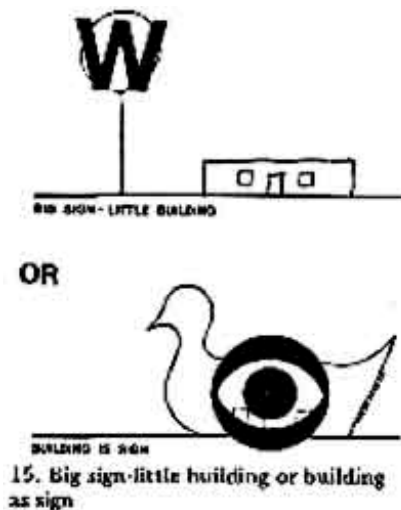


figure15. Big sign- little building or building as sign

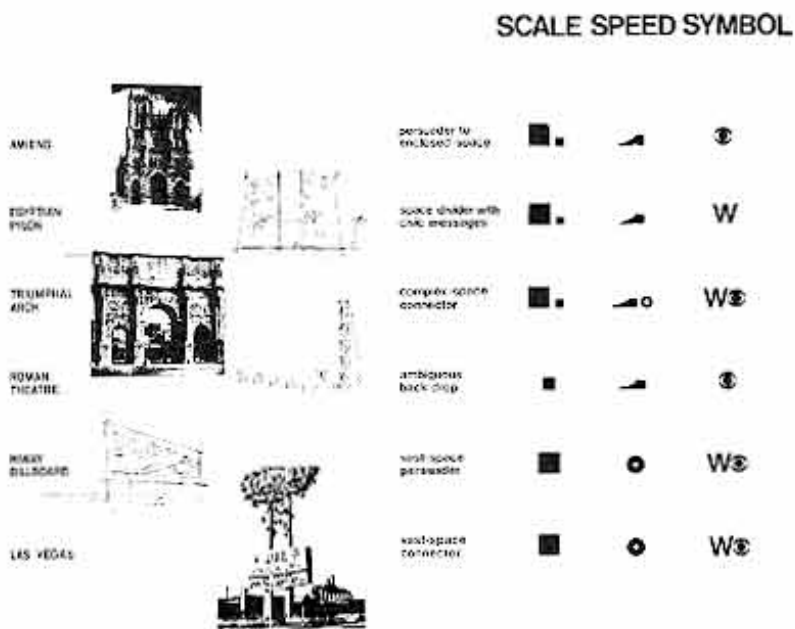


figure 16. A comparative analysis of "billboards" in space

FROM ROME TO LAS VEGAS

Las Vegas is the apotheosis of the desert town. Visiting Las Vegas in the mid-1960s was like visiting Rome in the late 1940s. For young Americans in the 1940s, familiar only with the auto-scaled, gridiron city and the antiurban theories of the previous architectural generation, the traditional urban spaces, the pedestrian scale, and the mixtures, yet continuities, of styles of the Italian

piazzas were a significant revelation. They rediscovered the piazza. Two decades later architects are perhaps ready for similar lessons about large open space, big scale, and high speed. Las Vegas is to the Strip what Rome is to the Piazza.

There are other parallels between Rome and Las Vegas: their expansive settings in the Campagna and in the Mojave Desert, for instance, that tend to focus and clarify their images. On the other hand, Las Vegas was built in a day, or rather, the Strip was developed in a virgin desert in a short time. It was not superimposed on an older pattern as were the pilgrim's Rome of the Counter-Reformation and the commercial strips of eastern cities, and it is therefore easier to study. Each city is an archetype rather than a prototype, an exaggerated example from which to derive lessons for the typical. Each city vividly superimposes elements of a supranational scale on the local fabric: churches in the religious capital, casinos and their signs in the entertainment capital. These cause violent juxtapositions of use and scale in both cities. Rome's churches, off streets and piazzas, are open to the public; the pilgrim, religious or architectural, can walk from church to church. The gambler or architect in Las Vegas can similarly take in a variety of casinos along the Strip. The casinos and lobbies of Las Vegas are ornamental and monumental and open to the promenading public; a few old banks and railroad stations excepted, they are unique in American cities. Nolli's map of the mid-eighteenth century reveals the sensitive and complex connections between public and private space in Rome (Fig. 17). Private building is shown in gray crosshatching that is carved into by the public spaces, exterior and interior. These spaces, open or roofed, are shown in minute detail through darker poché. Interiors of churches read like piazzas and courtyards of palaces, yet a variety of qualities and scales is articulated.



figure17. Nolli's Map of Rome (detail)



figure 18. Aerial photograph of upper Strip

MAPS OF LAS VEGAS

A "Nolli" map of the Las Vegas Strip reveals and clarifies what is public and what is private, but here the scale is enlarged by the inclusion of the parking lot, and the solid-to-void ratio is reversed by the open spaces of the desert. Mapping the Nolli components from an aerial photograph provides an intriguing crosscut of Strip systems (Fig. 18). These components, separated and redefined, could be undeveloped land, asphalt, autos, buildings, and ceremonial space (Figs. 19 a-e). Reassembled, they describe the Las Vegas equivalent of the pilgrims' way, although the description, like Nolli's map, misses the iconological dimensions of the experience (Fig. 20).

A conventional land-use map of Las Vegas can show the overall structure of commercial use in the city as it relates to other uses but none of the detail of use type or intensity. "Land-use" maps of the insides of casino complexes, however, begin to suggest the systematic planning that all casinos share (Fig. 21). Strip "address" and "establishment" maps can depict both intensity and variety of use (Fig. 22). Distribution maps show patterns of, for example, churches, and food stores (Figs. 24, 25) that Las Vegas shares with other cities and those such as wedding chapels and auto rental stations (Figs. 26, 27) that are Strip oriented and unique. It is extremely hard to suggest the atmospheric qualities of Las Vegas, because these are primarily dependent on watts (Fig. 23), animation, and iconology; however, "message maps," tourist maps, and brochures suggest some of it (Figs. 28, 71).



figure 19a. Upper strip, undeveloped land



figure 19d. Buildings



figure 19b. Asphalt

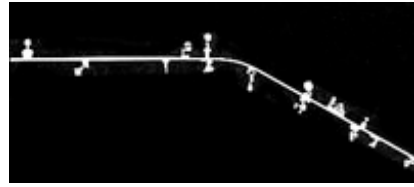


figure 19e. Ceremonial space



figure 19c. Autos



figure 20. Nolli's Las Vegas

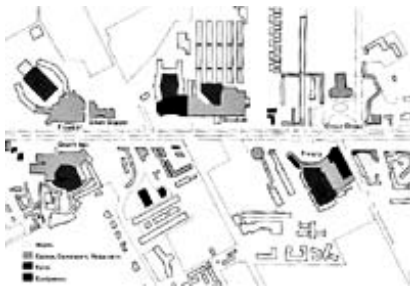


figure 21. map of Las Vegas Strip (detail) showing uses within buildings

figure 22. Map showing location of ground floor commercial establishments (1961) on three Las Vegas strips



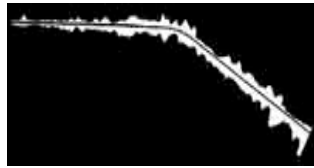


figure 23. Illumination levels on the Strip



figure 24-27. Maps showing comparative patterns: distribution of churches, food stores, wedding chapels, auto rentals



figure 28. Map of Las Vegas Strip (detail) showing every written word seen from the road

MAIN STREET AND THE STRIP

A street map of Las Vegas reveals two scales of movement within the

gridiron plan: that of Main Street and that of the Strip (Figs. 29, 30). The main street of Las Vegas is Fremont Street, and the earlier of two concentrations of casinos is located along three of four blocks of this street (Fig. 31). The casinos here are bazaarlike in the immediacy to the sidewalk of their clicking and tinkling gambling machines (Fig. 32). The Fremont Street casinos and hotels focus on the railroad depot at the head of the street; here the railroad and main street scales of movement connect. The depot building is now gone, replaced by a hotel, and the bus station is now the busier entrance to town, but the axial focus on the railroad depot from Fremont Street was visual, and possibly symbolic. This contrasts with the Strip, where a second and later development of casinos extends southward to the airport, the jet-scale entrance to town (Figs. 23, 24, 42, 43, 52, 54).



figure 29. Las Vegas street map



figure 30. Map showing buildings on three Las Vegas strips

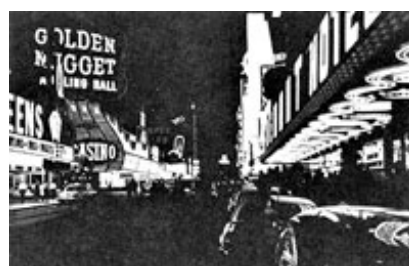


figure 31. Fremont Street



figure 32. Fremont Street casino entrance

One's first introduction to Las Vegas architecture is a forebear of Eero Saarinen's TWA Terminal, which is the local airport building. Beyond this piece of architectural image, impressions are scaled to the car rented at the airport. Here is the unraveling of the famous Strip itself, which, as Route 91, connects the airport with the downtown (Fig. 33).



figure 33. A detail from an "Edward Ruscha" elevation of the Strip. Tourist maps are made of the Grand Canal and the Rhine showing the route lined by its palaces. Ruscha made one of the Sunset Strip. We imitated his for the Las Vegas Strip.

SYSTEM AND ORDER ON THE STRIP

The image of the commercial strip is chaos. The order in this landscape is not obvious (Fig. 34). The continuous highway itself and its systems for turning are absolutely consistent. The median strip accommodates the U-turns necessary to a vehicular promenade for casino crawlers as well as left turns onto the local street pattern that the Strip intersects. The curbing allows frequent right turns for casinos and other commercial enterprises and eases the difficult transitions from highway to parking. The streetlights function superfluously along many parts of the Strip that are incidentally but abundantly lit by signs, but their consistency of form and position and their arching shapes begin to identify by day a continuous space of the highway, and the constant rhythm contrasts effectively with the uneven rhythms of the signs behind (Fig. 35).



figure 34. The order in this landscape is not obvious



figure 35. Streetlights, upper Strip

This counterpoint reinforces the contrast between two types of order on the Strip: the obvious visual order of street elements and the difficult visual order of buildings and signs. The zone *of* the highway is a shared order. The zone *off* the highway is an individual order (Fig. 36). The elements of the highway are civic. The buildings and signs are private. In combination they embrace continuity *and* discontinuity, going *and* stopping, clarity *and* ambiguity, cooperation *and* competition, the community *and* rugged individualism. The system of the highway gives order to the sensitive functions of exit and entrance, as well as to the image of the Strip as a sequential whole. It also generates places for individual enterprises to grow and controls the general direction of that growth. It allows variety and change along its sides and accommodates the contrapuntal, competitive order of the individual enterprises.



figure 36. Upper Strip looking North

There is an order along the sides of the highway. Varieties of activities are juxtaposed on the Strip: service stations, minor motels, and multimillion-dollar casinos. Marriage chapels ("credit cards accepted") converted from bungalows with added neon-lined steeples are apt to appear anywhere toward the downtown end. Immediate proximity of related uses, as on Main Street, where you *walk* from one store to another, is not required along the Strip because interaction is by car and highway. You drive from one casino to another even when they are adjacent because of the distance between them, and an intervening service station is not disagreeable.

CHANGE AND PERMANENCE ON THE STRIP

The rate of obsolescence of a sign seems to be nearer to that of an automobile than that of a building. The reason is not physical degeneration but what competitors are doing around you. The leasing system operated by the sign companies and the possibility of total tax write-off may have something to do with it. The most unique, most monumental parts of the Strip, the signs and casino facades, are also the most changeable; it is the neutral, systems-motel structures behind that survive a succession of facelifts and a series of themes up front. The Aladdin Hotel and Casino is Moorish in front and Tudor behind (Fig. 13).

Las Vegas's greatest growth has been since World War II (Figs. 37-40). There are noticeable changes every year: new hotels and signs as well as neon-embossed parking structures replacing on-lot parking on and behind Fremont Street. Like the agglomeration of chapels in a Roman church and the stylistic sequence of piers in a Gothic cathedral, the Golden Nugget casino has evolved over 30 years from a building with a sign on it to a totally sign-covered building (Fig. 41). The Stardust Hotel has engulfed a small restaurant and a second hotel in its expansion and has united the three-piece facade with 600 feet of computer programmed animated neon.

Figure 37. Las Vegas, August 1905



figure 38. Las Vegas, Fremont Street, 1910

figure 39. Las Vegas, Fremont Street, 1940s



figure 40. Las Vegas, Fremont Street, 1960s

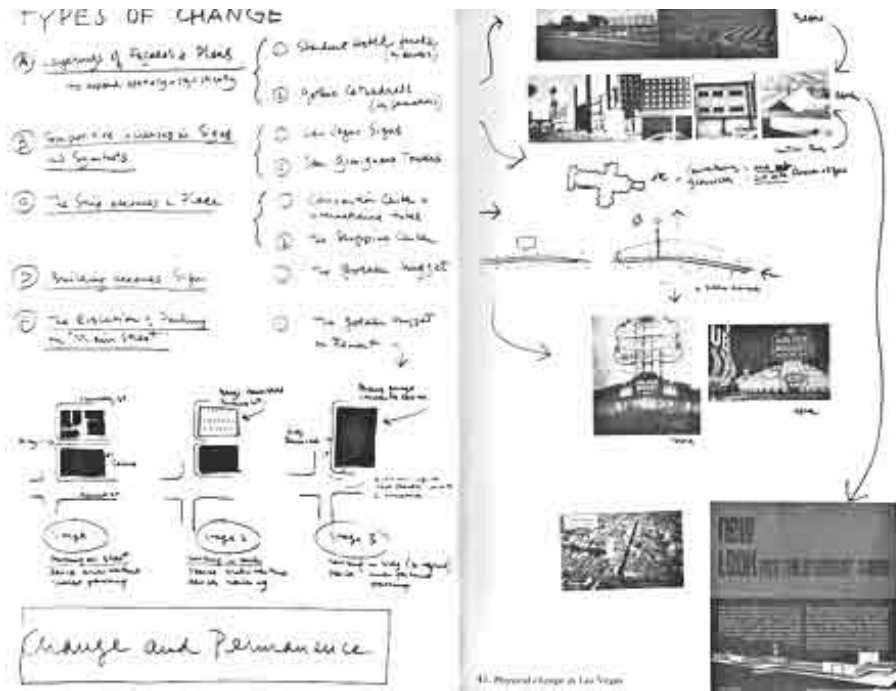


figure 41. Physical change in Las Vegas