More Venturi on Vegas

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE STRIP

It is hard to think of each flamboyant casino as anything but unique, and this is as it should be, because good advertising technique requires the differentiation of the product. However, these casinos have much in common because they are under the same sun, on the same Strip, and perform similar functions; they differ from other casinos—say, on Fremont Street—and from other hotels that are not casinos (Figs. 42, 43).

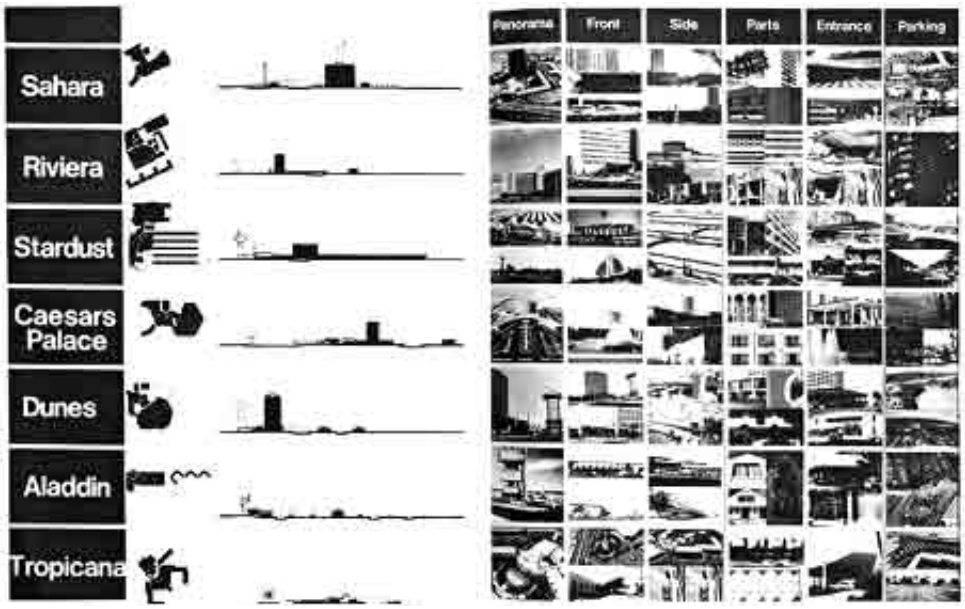

figure 42. A schedule of the Las Vegas Strip hotels: plans, sections, and elements

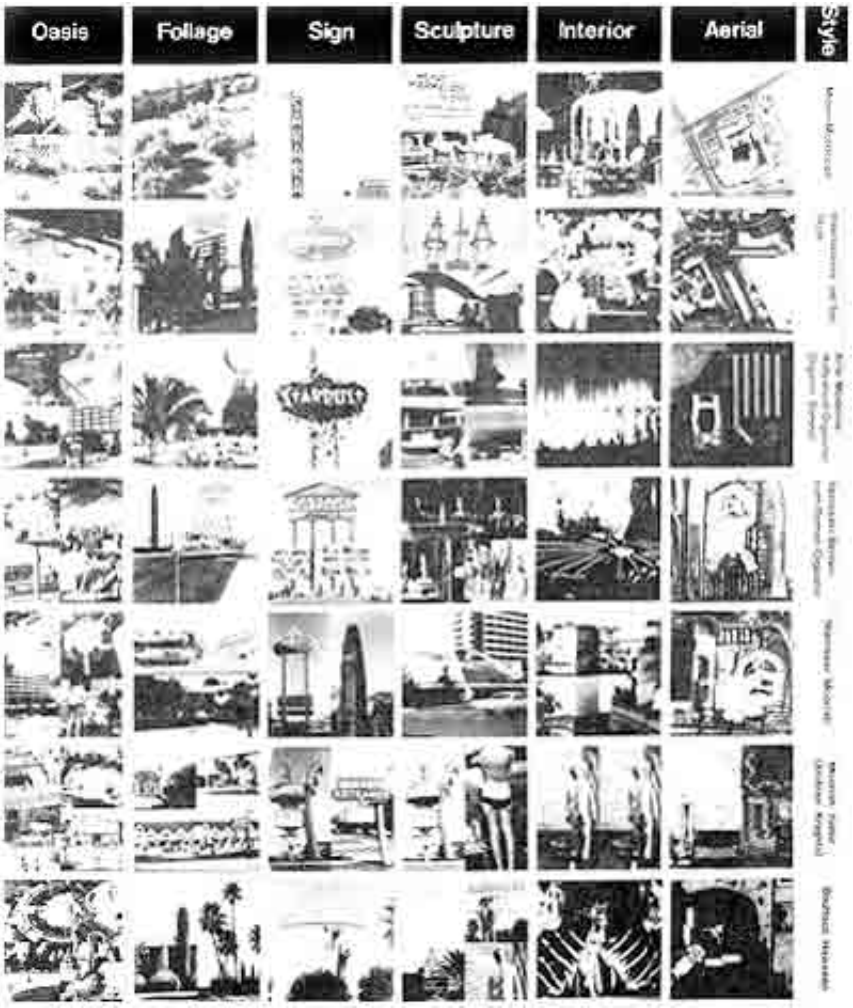

figure 43. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip hotels: elements, continued

A typical hotel-casino complex contains a building that is near enough to the highway to be seen from the road across the parked cars, yet far enough back to accommodate driveways, turnarounds, and parking. The parking in front is a token: It reassures the customer but does not obscure the building. It is prestige parking: The customer pays. The bulk of the parking, along the sides of the complex, allows direct access to the hotel yet stays visible from the highway. Parking is seldom at the back. The scales of movement and space of the highway relate to the distances between buildings; because they are far apart, they can be comprehended at high speeds. Front footage on the Strip has not yet reached the value it once had on Main Street, and parking is still an appropriate filler. Big space between buildings is characteristic of the Strip. It is significant that Fremont Street is more photogenic than the Strip. A single postcard can carry a view of the Golden Horseshoe, the Mint Hotel, the Golden Nugget, and the Lucky Casino. A single shot of the Strip is less spectacular; its enormous spaces

must be seen as moving sequences (Figs. 44, 45).

figure 44. Fremont Street hotels and casinos

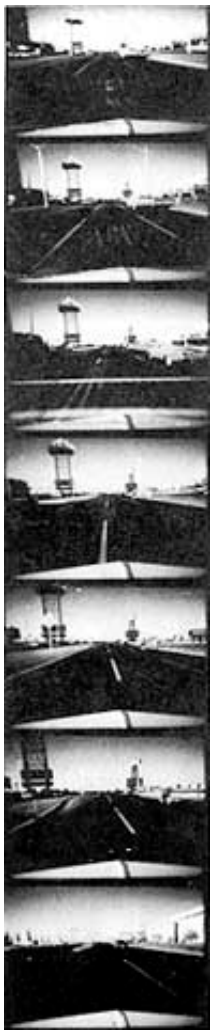

figure 45. Portion of a movie sequence traveling north on the Strip

The side elevation of the complex is important, because it is seen by approaching traffic from a greater distance and for a longer time than the facade. The rhythmic gables on the long, low, English medieval style, half-timbered motel sides of the Aladdin read emphatically across the parking space (Fig. 46) and through the signs and the giant statue of the neighboring Texaco station, and contrast with the modern Near Eastern flavor of the casino front. Casino fronts on the Strip often inflect in shape and ornament toward the right, to welcome right-lane traffic. Modern styles use a porte cochere that is diagonal in plan. Brazilianoid International styles use free forms.

figure 46. Aladdin Casino and Hotel

Service stations, motels, and other simpler types of buildings conform in general to this system of inflection toward the highway through the position and form of their elements. Regardless of the front, the back of the building is styleless, because the whole is turned toward the front and no one sees the back. The gasoline stations parade their universality (Fig. 47). The aim is to demonstrate their similarity to the one at home—your friendly gasoline station. But here they are not the brightest thing in town. This galvanizes them. A motel is a motel anywhere (Fig. 48). But here the imagery is heated up by the need to compete in the surroundings. The artistic influence has spread, and Las Vegas motels have signs like no others. Their ardor lies somewhere between the casinos and the wedding chapels. Wedding chapels, like many urban land uses, are not form-specific (Fig. 49). They tend to be one of a succession of uses a more generalized building type (a bungalow or a store front) may have. But a wedding-chapel style or image is maintained in different types through the use of symbolic ornament in neon, and the activity adapts itself to different inherited plans. Street furniture exists on the Strip as on other city streets, yet it is hardly in evidence.

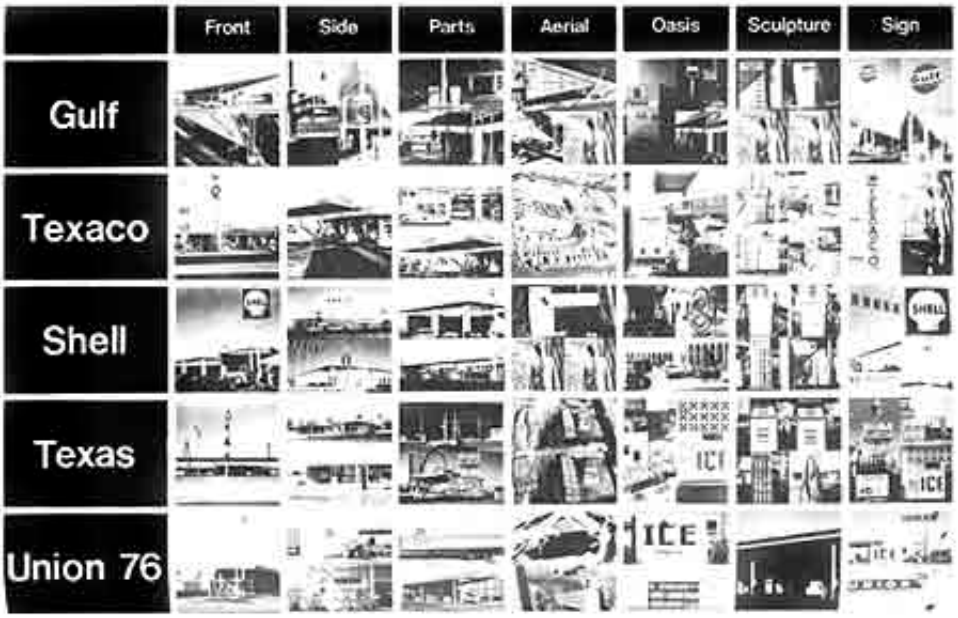

Figure 47. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip gas stations

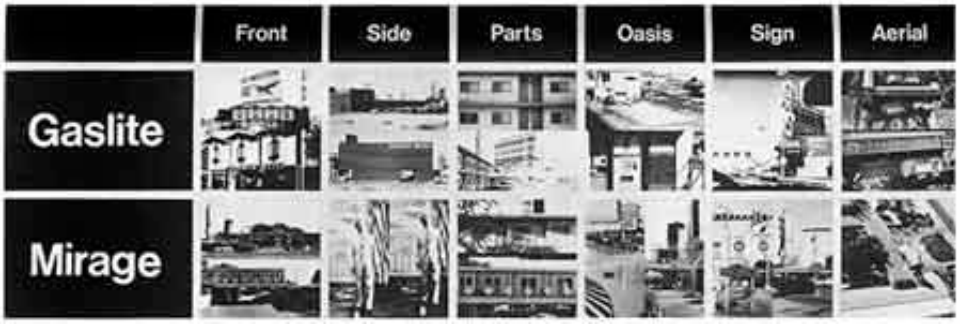

figure 48. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip motels

figure 49. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip wedding chapels

Beyond the town, the only transition between the Strip and the Mojave Desert is a zone of rusting beer cans (Fig. 50). Within the town, the transition is as ruthlessly sudden. Casinos whose fronts relate so sensitively to the highway turn their ill-kempt backsides toward the local environment,

exposing the residual forms and spaces of mechanical equipment and service areas.

figure 50. The Strip from the desert

THE INTERIOR OASIS

If the back of the casino is different from the front for the sake of visual impact in the "autoscape," the inside contrasts with the outside for other reasons. The interior sequence from the front door back progresses from gambling areas to dining, entertainment, and shopping areas, to hotel. Those who park at the side and enter there can interrupt the sequence. But the circulation of the whole focuses on the gambling rooms. In a Las Vegas hotel the registration desk is invariably behind you when you enter the lobby; before you are the gambling tables and machines. The lobby is the gambling room. The interior space and the patio, in their exaggerated separation from the environment, have the quality of an oasis.

LAS VEGAS LIGHTING

The gambling room is always very dark; the patio, always very bright. But both are enclosed: The former has no windows, and the latter is open only to the sky. The combination of darkness and enclosure of the gambling room and its subspaces makes for privacy, protection, concentration, and control. The intricate maze under the low ceiling never connects with outside light or outside space. This disorients the occupant in space and time. One loses track of where one is and when it is. Time is limitless, because the light of noon and midnight are exactly the same. Space is limitless, because the artificial light obscures rather than defines its boundaries (Fig. 51). Light is not used to define space. Walls and ceilings do not serve as reflective surfaces for light but are made absorbent and dark. Space is enclosed but limitless, because its edges are dark. Light sources, chandeliers, and the glowing, jukebox-like gambling machines themselves are independent of walls and ceilings. The lighting is antiarchitectural. Illuminated *baldacchini*,

more than in all Rome, hover over tables in the limitless shadowy restaurant at the Sahara Hotel.

figure 51. Caesar's Palace tourist brochure

The artificially lit, air-conditioned interiors complement the glare and heat of the agoraphobic auto-scaled desert. But the interior of the motel patio behind the casino is literally the oasis in a hostile environment (Fig. 52). Whether Organic Modern or Neoclassical Baroque, it contains the fundamental elements of the classic oasis: courts, water, greenery, intimate scale, and enclosed space. Here they are a swimming pool, palms, grass, and other horticultural importations set in a paved court surrounded by hotel suites, balconied or terraced on the court side for privacy. What gives poignancy to the beach umbrellas and chaises longues is the vivid, recent memory of the hostile cars poised in the asphalt desert beyond. The pedestrian oasis in the Las Vegas desert is the princely enclosure of the Alhambra, and it is the apotheosis of all the motel courts with swimming pools more symbolic than useful, the plain, low restaurants with exotic interiors, and the pretty shopping malls of the American strip.

Figure 52. Caesars Palace oasis

ARCHITECTURAL MONUMENTALITY AND THE BIG, LOW SPACE

The casino in Las Vegas is a big, low space. It is the archetype for all public interior spaces whose heights are diminished for reasons of budget and air conditioning. (The low, one-way-mirrored ceilings also permit outside observation of the gambling rooms.) In the past, volume was governed by structural span; height was relatively easy to achieve. Today, span is easy to achieve, and volume is governed by mechanical and economic limitations on height. But railroad stations, restaurants, and shopping arcades only ten feet high reflect as well a changing attitude to monumentality in our environment. In the past, big spans with their concomitant heights were an ingredient of architectural monumentality (Fig. 53). But our monuments are not the occasional tour de force of an Astrodome, a Lincoln Center, or a subsidized airport. These merely prove that big, high spaces do not automatically make architectural monumentality. We have replaced the monumental space of Pennsylvania Station by a subway above ground, and that of Grand Central Terminal remains mainly through its magnificent conversion to an advertising vehicle. Thus, we rarely achieve architectural monumentality when we try; our money and skill do not go into the traditional monumentality that expressed cohesion of the community through big scale, unified, symbolic, architectural elements. Perhaps we should admit that our cathedrals are the chapels without the nave and that, apart from theaters and ball parks, the occasional communal space that is big is a space for crowds of anonymous individuals without explicit connection with each other. The big, low mazes of the dark restaurant with alcoves combine being together and yet separate as does the Las Vegas casino. The lighting in the casino achieves a new monumentality for the low space. The controlled sources of artificial and colored light within the dark enclosures expand and unify the space by obscuring its physical limits. You are no longer in the bounded piazza but in the twinkling lights of the city at night.

Figure 53. Architectural monumentality and the roadside interior

LAS VEGAS STYLES

The Las Vegas casino is a combination form. The complex program of Caesars Palace—one of the grandest—includes gambling, dining and banqueting rooms, nightclubs and auditoria, stores, and a complete hotel. It is also a combination of styles. The front colonnade is San Pietro-Bernini in plan but Yamasaki in vocabulary and scale (Figs. 54, 55); the blue and gold mosaic work is Early Christian tomb of Galla Placidia. (The Baroque symmetry of its prototype precludes an inflection toward the right in this facade.) Beyond and above is a slab in Gio Ponti Pirelli-Baroque, and beyond that, in turn, a low wing in Neoclassical Motel Moderne. Economics has vanquished symmetry in a recent addition. But the new slab and the various styles are integrated by a ubiquity of Ed Stone screens. The landscaping is also eclectic. Within the Piazza San Pietro is the token parking lot. Among the parked cars rise five fountains rather than the two of Carlo Maderno; Villa d'Este cypresses further punctuate the parking environment. Gian de Bologna's *Rape of the Sabine Women* and statues of Venus and David, with slight anatomical exaggerations, grace the area around the porte cochere. Almost bisecting a Venus is an Avis, a sign identifying No. 2's offices on the premises (Figs. 56-58).

figure 54. Caesars Palace

figure 55. Caesars Palace tourist brochure

figure 56.Caesars Palace tourist brochure

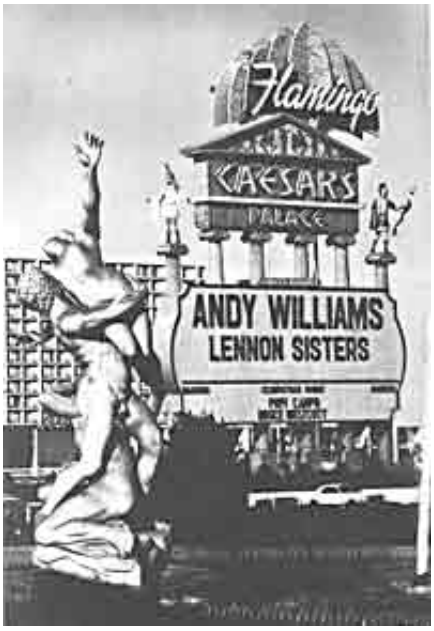

figure 57. Caesars Palace signs and statuary

figure 58. Caesars Palace signs and statuary

The agglomeration of Caesars Palace and of the Strip as a whole approaches the spirit if not the style of the late Roman Forum with its eclectic accumulations. But the sign of Caesars Palace with its Classical, plastic columns is more Etruscan in feeling than Roman (Figs. 59, 60). Although not so high as the Dunes Hotel sign next door or the Shell sign on the other side, its base is enriched by Roman centurions, (Fig. 6 1) lacquered like Oldenburg hamburgers, who peer over the acres of cars and across their desert empire to the mountains beyond. Their statuesque escorts, carrying trays of fruit, suggest the festivities within and are a background for the family snapshots of Middle Westerners. Massive Miesian light boxes announce square, expensive entertainers such as Jack Benny in 1930s-style marquee lettering appropriate for Benny if not for the Roman architrave it almost ornaments. The light boxes are not in the architrave; they are located off-center on the columns in order to inflect toward the highway and the parking.

fig. 59

fig. 60

fig. 61

figure 59. Caesar's Palace sign
figure 60. Piranesi's Pantheon/Caesars Palace sign
figure 61. Caesars Palace centurions

LAS VEGAS SIGNS

Signs inflect toward the highway even more than buildings. The big sign—independent of the building and more or less sculptural or pictorial—inflects by its position, perpendicular to and at the edge of the highway, by its scale, and sometimes by its shape. The sign of the Aladdin Hotel and Casino seems to bow toward the highway through the inflection in its shape (Fig. 62). It also is three dimensional, and parts of it revolve. The sign at the Dunes Hotel is more chaste: It is only two dimensional, and its back echoes its front, but it is an erection 22 stories high that pulsates at night (Fig. 63). The sign for The Mint Hotel on Route 91 at Fremont Street inflects toward the Casino several blocks away. Signs in Las Vegas use mixed media—words, pictures, and sculpture—to persuade and inform. A sign is, contradictorily, for day and night. The same sign works as polychrome sculpture in the sun and as black silhouette against the sun; at night it is a source of light. It revolves by day and becomes a play of lights at night

(Figs. 64-67). It contains scales for close-up and for distance (Fig. 68). Las Vegas has the longest sign in the world, the Thunderbird, and the highest, the Dunes. Some signs are hardly distinguishable at a distance from the occasional high-rise hotels along the Strip. The sign of the Pioneer Club on Fremont Street talks. Its cowboy, 60 feet high, says "Howdy Pardner" every 30 seconds. The big sign at the Aladdin Hotel has spawned a little sign with similar proportions to mark the entrance to the parking. "But such signs!" says Tom Wolfe. "They soar in shapes before which the existing vocabulary of art history is helpless. I can only attempt to supply names—Boomerang Modern, Palette Curvilinear, Flash Gordon MingAlert Spiral, McDonald's Hamburger Parabola, Mint Casino Elliptical, Miami Beach Kidney."[(3)] Buildings are also signs. At night on Fremont Street, whole buildings are illuminated but not through reflection from spotlights; they are made into sources of light by closely spaced neon tubes. Amid the diversity, the familiar Shell and Gulf signs stand out like friendly beacons in a foreign land. But in Las Vegas they reach three times higher into the air than at your local service station to meet the competition of the casinos.

figure 62. Aladdin signs

figure 63. Dunes hotel and signs

fig.64

fig. 65

fig. 66

fig. 67

figures 64-67. Stardust sign

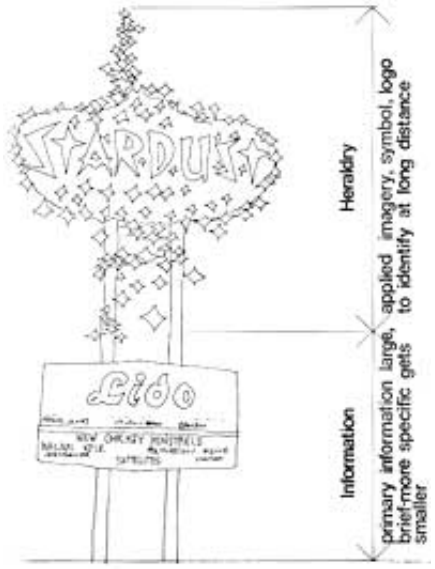

figure 68. Physiognomy of a typical casino sign

More Las Vegas signage

INCLUSION AND THE DIFFICULT ORDER

Henri Bergson called disorder an order we cannot see. The emerging order of the Strip is a complex order. It is not the easy, rigid order of the urban renewal project or the fashionable "total design" of the megastructure. It is, on the contrary, a manifestation of an opposite direction in architectural theory: Broadacre City—a travesty of Broadacre City, perhaps, but a kind of vindication of Frank Lloyd Wright's predictions for the American landscape. The commercial strip within the urban sprawl is, of course, Broadacre City with a difference. Broadacre City's easy, motival order identified and unified its vast spaces and separate buildings at the scale of the omnipotent automobile. Each building, without doubt, was to be designed by the Master or by his Taliesin Fellowship, with no room for honky-tonk improvisations. An easy control would be exercised over similar elements within the universal, Usonian vocabulary to the exclusion, certainly, of commercial vulgarities. But the order of the Strip *includes*; it includes at all levels, from the mixture of seemingly incongruous land uses to the mixture of seemingly incongruous advertising media plus a system of neo-Organic or neo-Wrightian restaurant motifs in Walnut Formica (Fig. 69). It is not an order dominated by the expert and made easy for the eye. The moving eye in the

moving body must work to pick out and interpret a variety of changing, juxtaposed orders, like the shifting configurations of a Victor Vasarely painting (Fig. 70). It is the unity that "maintains, but only just maintains, a control over the clashing elements which compose it. Chaos is very near; its nearness, but its avoidance, gives . . . force. " (4)

figure 69. A message to the Strip Beautification Committee

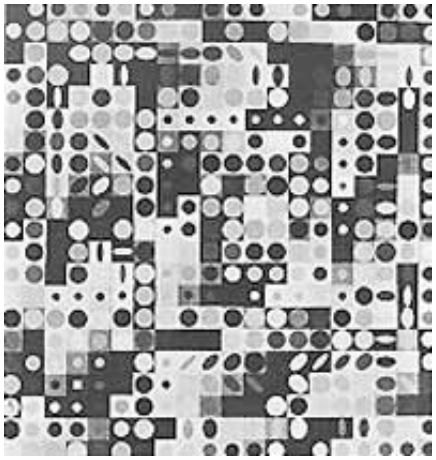

figure 70. Painting by Victor Vasarely

IMAGE OF LAS VEGAS: INCLUSION AND ALLUSION IN ARCHITECTURE

Tom Wolfe used Pop prose to suggest powerful images of Las Vegas. Hotel brochures and tourist handouts suggest others (Fig. 71). J. B. Jackson, Robert Riley, Edward Ruscha, John Kouwenhoven, Reyner Banham, and William Wilson have elaborated on related images. For the architect or urban designer, comparisons of Las Vegas with others of the world's "pleasure zones" (Fig. 72)—with Marienbad, the Alhambra, Xanadu, and Disneyland, for instance—suggest that essential to the imagery of pleasure-zone architecture are lightness, the quality of being an oasis in a perhaps hostile context, heightened symbolism, and the ability to engulf the visitor in a new role: for three days one may imagine oneself a centurion at Caesars Palace, a ranger at the Frontier, or a jetsetter at the Riviera rather than a salesperson from Des Moines, Iowa, or an architect from Haddonfield, New Jersey.

Figure 71. Las Vegas tourist brochure

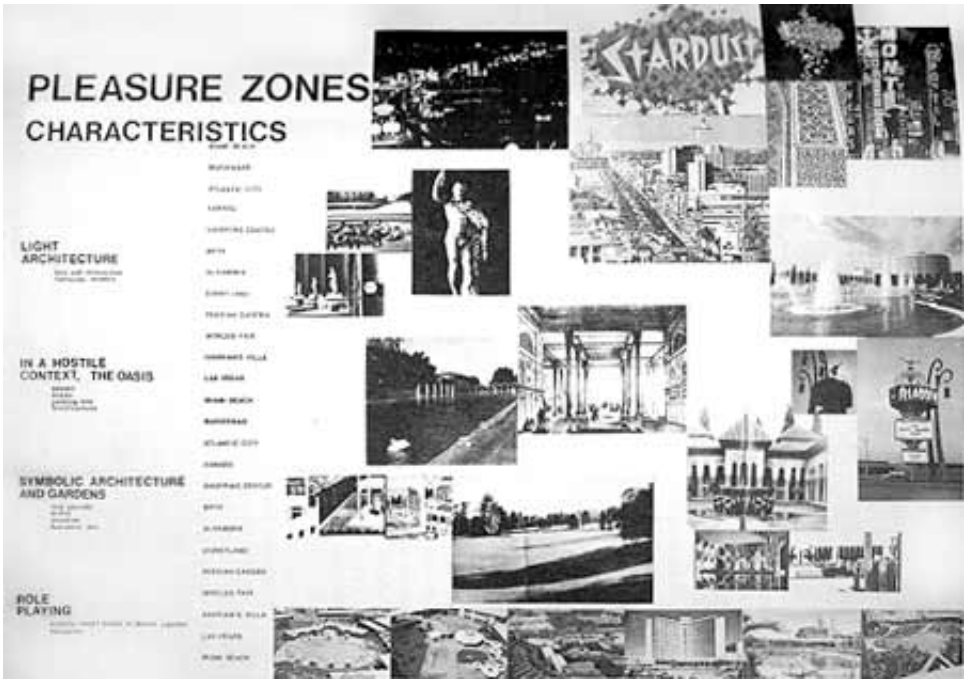

figure 72. A comparative analysis of Pleasure Zones

However, there are didactic images more important than the images of recreation for us to take home to New Jersey and Iowa: one is the Avis with the Venus; another, Jack Benny under a classical pediment with Shell Oil beside him, or the gasoline station beside the multimillion-dollar casino. These show the vitality that may be achieved by an architecture of inclusion or, by contrast, the deadness that results from too great a preoccupation with tastefulness and total design. The Strip shows the value of symbolism and allusion in an architecture of vast space and speed and proves that people, even architects, have fun with architecture that reminds them of something else, perhaps of harems or the Wild West in Las Vegas, perhaps of the nation's New England forebears in New Jersey. Allusion and comment, on the past or present or on our great commonplaces or old clichés, and inclusion of the everyday in the environment, sacred and profane—these are what are lacking in present-day Modern architecture. We can learn about them from Las Vegas as have other artists from their own profane and stylistic sources.

Pop artists have shown the value of the old cliché used in a new context to achieve a new meaning—the soup can in the art gallery—to make the common uncommon. And in literature, Eliot and Joyce display, according to Poirier, "an extraordinary vulnerability ... to the idioms, rhythms, artifacts, associated with certain urban environments or situations. The multitudinous styles of *Ulysses* are so dominated by them that there are only intermittent

sounds of Joyce in the novel and no extended passage certifiably in his as distinguished from a mimicked style."[5] Poirier refers to this as the "decreative impulse."[6] Eliot himself speaks of Joyce's doing the best he can "with the material at hand."[7] Perhaps a fitting requiem for the irrelevant works of Art that are today's descendants of a once meaningful Modern architecture are Eliot's lines in "East Coker":[8]

> *That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:*
> *A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,*
> *Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle*
> *With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter....*

3. Tom Wolfe, *The Kandy-Colored Tangerine-Flake Streamlined Baby* (New York:Noonday Press, 1966),p. 8.
4. August Heckscher, *The Public Happiness* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1962), p. 289.
5. Richard Poirier, "T. S. Eliot," p. 20.
6. Ibid., p. 21.
7. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), p. 125.
8. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), p. 13.