The Strip as a Movie Set

Immersive Experience Design in Las Vegas

Stefan Al

Introduction

Perfectly timed with the *Cisco Kid* movie series (1939–1950), Las Vegas resort builders welcomed guests with cowboy saloons and a bar with relics of "Pancho," the Kid's sidekick. A year after P*rincess of the Nile* (1954), the Dunes resort opened on the Strip with a smiling Sultan, blown up three stories tall. Not coincidentally just after Hollywood blockbuster *Cleopatra* (1963), Caesars Palace installed a lounge in a floating Cleopatra's barge. Two years after Spielberg's classic *Hook* (1991), Treasure Island opened with a pirate village, a skull and bones sign, and scorching frigates.

If any city is an example of life imitating art, it is Las Vegas. "The building progression on the Strip," researcher William Fox writes, "relied on a growing synergy with Hollywood," giving the masses an experience "as if they had stepped through the screens of movie theaters and television sets and onto a soundstage for the Roman Coliseum, if not into the arena itself."[1]

The Strip confounds the boundaries on the relationship between the virtual and the real. *Viva Las Vegas* (1964) featured Elvis, who was a live performer in Las Vegas. Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks!* (1996) reenacts the actual demolition of the Landmark's tower. The Rat Pack in *Ocean's*

1. William L. Fox, *In the Desert of Desire: Las Vegas and the Culture of Spectacle* (University of Nevada Press, 2007).

Eleven (1960) were the live performers of the casinos that they would end up robbing on screen. Even television series have taken advantage of the Strip's camera-friendly image, including *CSI: Las Vegas* and MTV's *Real World* reality show, held in a Palms casino suite—now available for bookings, without the camera crew.

No other city has gone as far to exploit Hollywood as Las Vegas. Back in 1969, real estate mogul Kirk Kerkorian bought the venerated MGM Studios, sold its real estate, and built an MGM-movie themed casino. He then featured the studio's logo, known throughout the world, on the casino's rugs, walls, and ashtrays. In fact, the Strip's first two resorts, the El Rancho and the Last Frontier built in the 1940s, were developed by entrepreneurs who were also movie theatre operators.

But besides the many connections between Las Vegas and Hollywood themes and owners, the architecture between the two had design connections as well. In the following, I will explain three striking architectural similarities: 1) false front architecture; 2) immersive design; and 3) digital screens. In today's "Experience Economy," these three qualities of the Strip's architecture find themselves in retail stores worldwide. In an age of ubiquitous online shopping, retail corporations are eager to provide unique experiences that bring customers back to brick-and-mortar stores. In their quest they are going in less explored architecture approaches to connect with customers, seamlessly integrating physical and digital communication. Their efforts are not unlike in Las Vegas, where developers have for decades used architectural experimentation and technology in the hope of attracting people to the Mojave Desert.

False Front Architecture

In 1963, Tom Wolfe was ecstatic at what he saw in Las Vegas. At a visit of YESCO's office, a local sign design and manufacturing company, he noticed a model prepared for the Lucky Strike Casino sign. Two red curving faces came together into a narrow spine, as tall as a sixteen story-sky-

scraper. In contrast, the structure which the sign meant to decorate was only a two-story building, the Lucky casino. This incredible form fit perfectly in his expedition investigating "the new culture-makers" of "popular" society.

"I don't know . . . It's sort of a nose effect. Call it a nose,"[2] designer Hermon Boernge said of the shape of the narrow vertical face. Wolfe was amazed at the designer's description. "Okay, a nose, but it rises sixteen stories high above a two-story building," Wolfe wrote. "In Las Vegas no farseeing entrepreneur buys a sign to fit a building he owns. He rebuilds the building to support the biggest sign he can get up the money for and, if necessary, changes the name. The Lucky Strike Casino today is the Lucky Casino, which fits better when recorded in sixteen stories of flaming peach and incandescent yellow in the middle of the Mojave Desert."

This "nose" represented a tipping point. Although it was only a remodeling of Lucky Strike Casino, at 153 feet, it was the tallest structure in Las Vegas (see Image 2.1). The shapes of the sign designers, claimed Wolfe, easily rivaled the modern forms of elite architects: "In the Young Electric Sign Co. era signs have become the architecture of Las Vegas, and the most whimsical, Yale seminar frenzied devices of the two late geniuses of Baroque Modern, Frank Lloyd Wright and Eero Saarinen, seem rather stuffy business, like a jest at a faculty meeting, compared to it."

In contrast to these celebrated architects, the Las Vegas sign designers didn't waste time theorizing their work. While the artists created a wholly original and new art vocabulary, "Las Vegas' sign makers work so far out beyond the frontiers of conventional studio art they have no names themselves for the forms they create," Wolfe wrote of "America's first unconscious avant-garde." So the Pop critic lent a hand coining names of their shapes: "Boomerang Modern, Palette Curvilinear, Flash Gordon Ming-Alert Spiral, McDonald's Hamburger Parabola, Mint Casino Elliptical, Miami Beach Kidney."

2. Quoted in Tom Wolfe, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (*Macmillan, 2008), 8.

The Lucky remodeling instigated a trend of using signs to make buildings seem more impressive than they actually were. Architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown called these "decorated sheds,"[3] plain buildings with independently applied signage—like the 1958 Stardust, which had plastered a large sign of a planetary system on what was essentially a collection of industrial barracks (see Image 2.2). Or the Golden Nugget in 1949, which had built a sign so big; it made the building seem twice the size. Since the false front only affected the appearance of the building, not its substance, it was the antithesis of what was taught in architecture schools—where the building's substance is supposed to be expressive. Nevertheless, the false fronts were cover-ups of unremarkable buildings that achieved at a relatively low cost a maximum of visibility.

Whether a conscious effort or not, the casino builders had expanded on the fundamentals of western architecture—a style characterized by false fronts, making one-story cabins look like two-story saloons. Historian Richard Erdoes later wrote of Western architecture: "The false fronts were pasted like sheets of cardboard to one-story log cabins or board shacks to give the impression of splendid two-story saloons. In character with the Westerner's proclivity for bragging, for trying to appear a little more than life-size, the false fronts gave the appearance of a stage set."[4]

Coincidentally, the false fronts of frontier towns were also typical of Hollywood movie sets. Las Vegas, by building false fronts, got to the essence of the western architecture and Hollywood, which are all about faking it.

3. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1967).
4. Richard Erdoes, *Saloons of the Old West* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 37.

Image 2.1. *Lucky Casino. Credit: Stefan Al.*

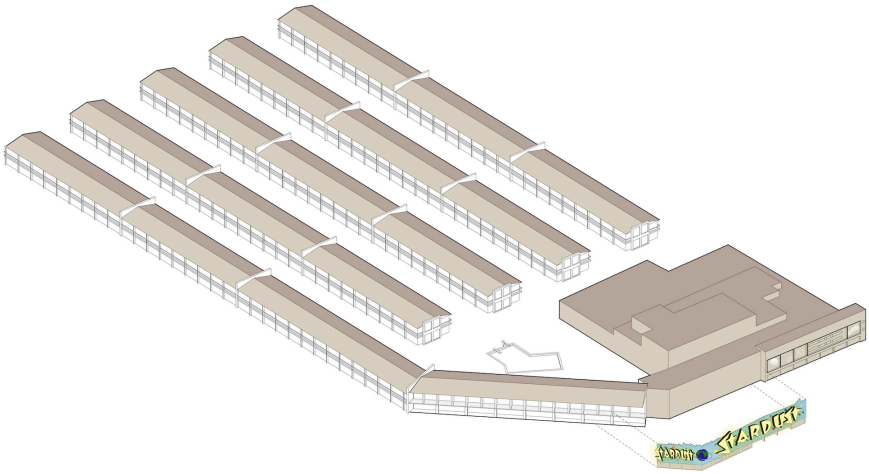

Image 2.2. *Stardust Casino. Credit: Stefan Al.*

Immersive Interiors

From lounging on a floating Cleopatra's barge, to dining in a Magical Empire with fireballs shooting from a dragon-toothed cave, Las Vegas has built fully immersive places to transport people to a different world, away from everyday reality.

The most immersive of all was the Domes of the Sea, a seafood restaurant built at the Dunes in 1963 (see Image 2.3). It was a siren song of a dining experience, staking a claim on the Deep-Sea theme, a popular science fiction trope. The world became fascinated with new oceanic discoveries of the late 1950s, when the first nuclear-powered submarine crossed under the Arctic ice cap, and Jacques Piccard descended to the deepest spot in the ocean. Hollywood exploited the deep-sea fascination with *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1961); accordingly, the Dunes expanded its Arabian Nights desert theme with a bit of ocean and a mermaid stage prop.

Architect Milton Schwartz built a saucer-shaped building that appeared to float in a pool of water: "It looked like it came from outer space."[5] But as a white skeleton of curvilinear ribbons suspended the sand- colored roof, while bubbling water shimmered light from underneath, the saucer appeared equally like a crustacean. (It was a classic case of form follows food—a seafood restaurant in the shape of a shell.)

While on the exterior the restaurant represented a clamshell abstractly, on the inside it did so literally. Schwartz collaborated with set designer Sean Kenny on the interior. At the center of the dome, below the iridescent inner-shell-like vaulted ceiling, they floated a special performer. "I had chosen a woman with long, golden blonde hair," Schwartz said. "She was five-foot-six and played a harp, a golden harp, and I placed her in a seashell in the center of the restaurant that rolled around on a figure eight track in the water."[6]

The Dome of the Sea's level of immersion signaled a distinct departure from other restaurants. Previously star performers had been the focal point. But Schwartz and Kenny encircled guests with wall-projections of images of fish and seaweed, giving them a full 360-degree sea panorama. It made people become full participants in the seascape. Schwartz remembered, "The people became part of the show."

Guests walked up to a saucer-shaped building that appeared to float in a pool of bubbling water, light shimmering from underneath. Inside the dome, below an iridescent inner-shell-like vaulted ceiling, they would see a blond mermaid harpist sitting in a seashell that rolled on a figure eight track in a pool. Looking around them, they would get a full 360-degree sea panorama with wall projections of seaweed and fish.

5. Milton Schwartz, "Oral History of Milton Schwartz: Interview by Harvey M. Choldin." Chicago Architects Oral History Project (The Art Institute of Chicago, 2007), 57.
6. Schwartz, "Oral History," 69.

For some, however, the experience was too authentic. With projections of fish and seaweed, the harp-playing mermaid riding her seashell incessantly in figure eights—all of this under an iridescent ceiling, the entire dome floating on a bubbling pool—it actually made some people seasick.[7]

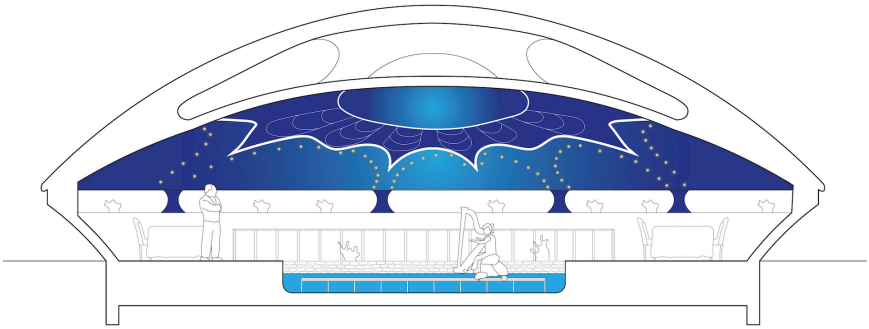

Image 2.3. *Cross section of the Dome of the Sea. Credit: Stefan Al.*

Digital Screens

Despite people being increasingly glued to their smartphones and electronic devices, Las Vegas developers have found a way to get attention in the digital age: bigger digital screens. These digital screens, like the Aria sign, a 25-story tall structure packed with 11 million pixels, show nonstop commercials.

Las Vegas is symptomatic of a trend of what cultural philosopher Paul Virilio calls "media buildings"—structures dedicated to housing information rather than habitation. In contrast to conventional architecture that presents a static image, these buildings display constantly changing scenes. While the high-tech buildings provide exciting opportunities to architects, some psychologists blame them for increased cases of ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).

7. Schwartz, "Oral History," 69.

But Las Vegas has no intention of limiting people's "screen time." Already in 1994, the city built the Fremont Street Experience, a vaulted LED canopy floating above Fremont Street—the world's largest electric screen, effectively the size of five city blocks (see Image 2.4). Las Vegas has gone so far in building digital distractions that it turned the sky into a giant television set.

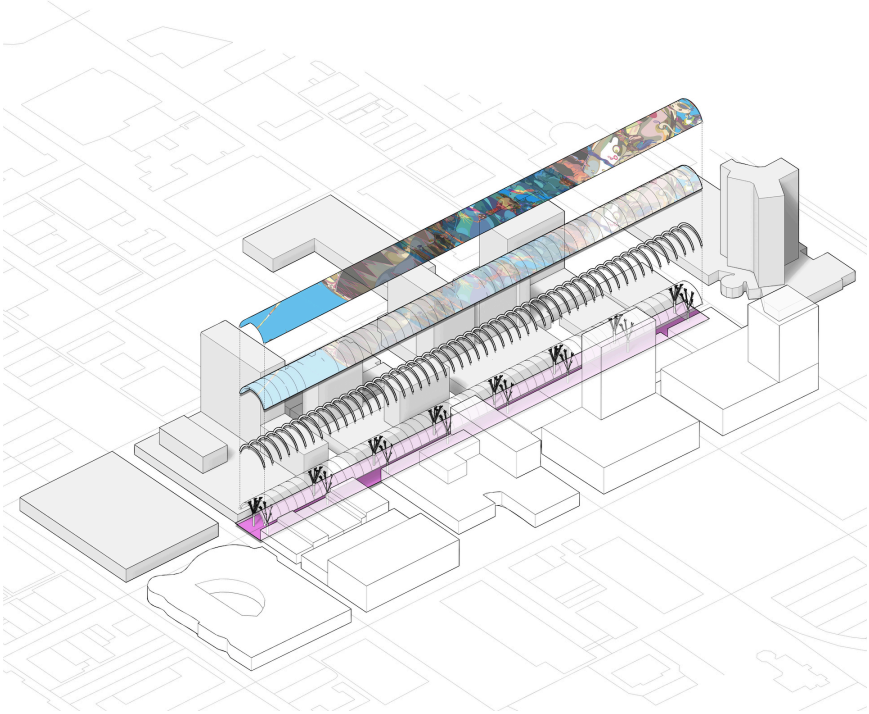

***Image 2.4**. Exploded view of the Fremont Street Experience. Credit: Stefan Al.*

Conclusion

These three architectural approaches combined amplify a unique sense of virtuality in Las Vegas. False front architecture draws people in from afar. Immersive interiors engage all their senses from up close. Digital screens present them with ever changing imagery, and possibly interactive ones as well. Finally, the shared symbolism between Hollywood and the Strip ensures that the images are recognized by everyone.

As a result, the architecture of the Strip confounds the distinction between the virtual and the real. Such a condition is described by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard in his book *Hyperreality*. He referred to a Borges fable in which cartographers had drawn a map so detailed that it covered the territory entirely. But where in Borges's story the map frays, Baudrillard inverts the story as a metaphor for today's world: "if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map."

There is much to learn from the new spectacular architecture of Las Vegas. The developers of the Las Vegas Strip created a uniquely virtual, uniquely mediated, and uniquely immersive world. Various researchers have recognized this experiential aspect of the Strip: "Consider Las Vegas, the experience capital of America," wrote Pine and Gilmore in *The Experience Economy*. "Virtually everything about Vegas is a designed experience, from the slot machines at the airport to the gambling casinos that line the Strip; from the themed hotels and restaurants to the singing, circus, and magic shows."[8] Resorts on the Strip have professionalized the design of customer experience. The city had become a pioneer in the "experience economy," in which companies compete by orchestrating memorable events for their customers.

8. Joseph B. Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (Harvard Business Press, 1999).

But many of the city's most iconic spaces took their cues from Hollywood. Not unlike the construction of a movie set, Las Vegas developers employed interdisciplinary teams of architects, interior designers, set designers, and engineers. Together, they aimed to conceive not merely buildings but "movie sets." They left us with immersive experiences in which we can no longer distinguish between the virtual and the real.

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