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FIFTY SHADES OF LAS VEGAS

PIĘCDZIESIĄT TWARZY LAS VEGAS

Abstract

A glass pyramid, a sphinx and a Medieval Excalibur, an Eiffel tower, a Statue of Liberty, a Ponte Rialto with an escalator and a canal sailed by gondolas with Mickey Mouse – these are the faces of Las Vegas. Kitsch, excess and chaos are concepts that form the universe of the semantics of Las Vegas. We can also attempt to understand this identity, distinct both in its unbridled form and the ideas represented by the city, by referring to Bakhtin's concept of the carnival.

Keywords: Las Vegas, kitsch, camp, art, architecture, city

Streszczenie

Szklana piramida, sfinks i średniowieczny Excalibur, wieża Eiffla, Statua Wolności, Ponte Rialto z ruchomymi schodami i kanał, po którym pływają gondole wraz z myszką Miki – oto oblicza Las Vegas. Kicz, nadmiar i chaos to pojęcia tworzące uniwersum znaczeń Las Vegas. Tę tożsamość, charakterystyczną zarówno w nieokreślonej formie, jak i ideach reprezentowanych przez miasto, można próbować zrozumieć, odwołując się także do bachtinowskiej koncepcji karnawału.

Słowa kluczowe: Las Vegas, kicz, kamp, sztuka, architektura, miasto, karnawał

1. Introduction

2019 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Elvis Presley's first concert in Las Vegas. We can almost still believe that Elvis lives when walking down the neon streets of this brightly lit city, in which Elvis lookalikes not only sing or encourage us to buy hot dogs, but also preside over speed weddings. And, although it is sometimes said that it is Berlin, Paris or New York that never sleep, it is Las Vegas that truly never sleeps. It does not sleep, because the artificial horizon, the artificial sky and the artificial sun look much better than the genuine ones.

As Hermann Broch claimed, kitsch is created when truth is abandoned in favour of beauty [4, p. 114]. According to Broch the aims of kitsch are meant to be beauty and decoration, instead of *truth*, which should be the guiding principle of every active artist and the art that they create. It is difficult not to acknowledge that in Broch's already historical concept that features a highly averse attitude towards kitsch, which – as “the art of happiness” [11] – is a form that continuously escapes definitive assessment. Even though, after the pop-art revolution and the later concept of camp by Sontag, even the average audience of kitsch culture does not need to be ashamed of satisfying their aesthetic tastes and yearnings.

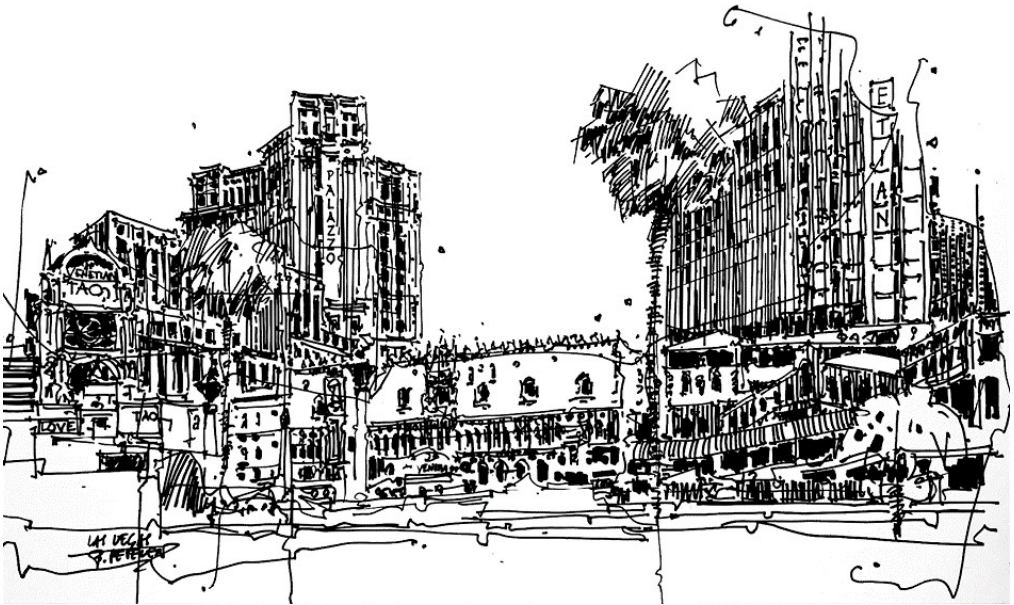


Fig. 1. “The Venetian” hotel and shopping mall complex, Las Vegas Strip, Las Vegas, Nevada; drawing by B. Malinowska-Petelenz

Susan Sontag, in her “Notes on ‘Camp’” [16] made an attempt not only to redefine kitsch, but also to develop this aesthetic discourse. She described and placed within culture the aesthetic of excess called camp, in which kitsch takes on a new meaning, gaining an ironic context. According to Sontag, the fundamental criterion that defines camp is its intended artificiality, but also – from the historical notion of the intention truth of the artist – it relocates the axis of

significance onto the audience and its conscious. Camp is therefore not read in the categories of the artist, but the degree of stylisation; it is also a dependency between the observed object and the audience's cultural experience and sophistication. Sontag lists examples such as Art Nouveau, the gothic novel, the extreme hyperbole of femininity in Fellini's work, as well as the works of Gaudi. Camp, as an aesthetic of post-modernity, has the character of a collage, being full of analogies and references, irony and distance. Camp can also appear over time. That which was deliberately serious during its deliberate creation can become camp years later. This is clearly visible in Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns, as today the famous "looks" have become cultural gestures and signs transformed by successive generations¹.

The transformation of meanings, their exploitation, modification and recycling are some of the permanent elements of the popular culture of the twentieth and the twenty-first century. Postmodernism, which made collage, quoting and references its *modus operandi*, has left us with a set of formal solutions that create an essential part of the visual heritage of the past decades. In the case of Las Vegas, continued postmodernism, transforming iconic cultural meanings into their pop and kitsch versions, create an entire universe of notions that form this extraordinary American city.

2. The essence of the American Dream

A glass pyramid, a sphinx and a Medieval Excalibur, an Eiffel tower, a Garnier's opera, a Statue of Liberty and a Brooklyn Bridge, towers of Manhattan, the MGM Grand and a di Trevi fountain, a Ponte Rialto with escalators and a canal, sailed on by gondolas with Mickey Mouse – these are the faces of kitsch that form Las Vegas – a striking and "hideous phenomenon of culture" [2, p. 83], as well as the "urban essence of American roadside architecture". In this case the city is formed by a desert highway surrounded by gilded sheds that glimmer with neon lights. The postmodernist opposition to big business and technocracy, which came to be symbolised by the tower buildings designed by Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, reached its peak in the growth of popular culture that Las Vegas turned out to be.

As Bogdan Paczkowski wrote, pop-art initially had no particular connection with architecture. However, who knows if the American Robert Venturi, considered to be the main inspirator of post-modern architecture, would have devoted so much attention to neon signs and advertising facades that decorate the hotels and casinos of Las Vegas if it had not been for Andy Warhol. In his book "Learning from Las Vegas" he suggested that we learn from the image of this city, contrasting the sterility and emptiness of modern architecture with the spontaneity and liveliness of the commercial street, full of signs, symbols and codes [13].

Both Reyner Bahnam and Charles W. Moore were precursors of an analytical perspective on America's commercial architecture. Its continuator was Venturi himself, the apologist of camp, who, along with Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, in the "Learning from Las Vegas" [20] manifesto, performed an analysis of this city, which causes aversion in

¹ E.g. Quentin Tarantino, more [in:] [10].



Fig. 2. The legendary sign „Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas” near the entryway to the city, Las Vegas Boulevard; phot. B. Malinowska-Petelenz



Fig. 3. The Strip, Las Vegas, Nevada; phot. by B. Malinowska-Petelenz

architects and aestheticians. The authors deconstructed modernist thought, or rather the vision of modernism that breaks away from romantic eclecticism, introducing sterilised and functional architecture that abolishes the dissonance between function and form, between massing and ornament. Venturi ennobled Disneyland, casinos and highways, and even the

ugly architecture of plastic roadside diners. He proved that it was Las Vegas that was the embodiment of the modernist dogma that form follows function², which is most fully realised in the hamburger stand, much more so than in the meticulous and abstract icon buildings following Le Corbusier.

The authors therefore weaved their narrative from the perspective of the car driver. In this story, the reader becomes a passenger of this trip [17, p. 84], a sort of partner in crime, in pursuit of a fresh perspective. The city, and especially its primary circulation axis – The Strip – is viewed from the window of a moving car. It attacks the observer with intrusive logos and billboards, banners, advertisements and neon signs creating an eclectic and loud architecture that is full of hyperrealist references, quotes and popular, poor symbolism. Venturi, thanks to this modernist simplification, clashes complexity with simplicity, clarity – with contradiction and ambiguousness. He simultaneously wrote of urban space as a circulation system [19]. From the pages of “Learning from Las Vegas“ there emerges a portrait of a “frenetic prototype of one of the most fascinating metaphors of contemporaneity – the theme park“³. Venturi ennobled that which is ordinary and ugly, comparing The Strip with the Roman piazza, he elevated the streets of Las Vegas, teeming with life and lit with the light of neon signs, with their billboards and pop-culture symbolism that is understandable to all. America has, after all, drawn heavily on Europe, while also having given back quite a lot – in a manner that is distorted and covered with Disney gold.

The hallucinogenic image of Las Vegas functions in a landscape shaped primarily in the eye of the beholder sitting in a moving car, another myth of the American identity. The Las Vegas Strip is a contemporary parallel to Benjamin’s passage, modified through the difference in speed. The speed of the motorised user of Las Vegas and the nineteenth-century flaneur, however, create two different social realities. This is why architecture in Las Vegas forgoes the facade (“first the symbol within the space, then the form within the space“ [20, p. 24]), it is the advertisement signs that are the most important. Signs created with an audience in motion in mind, with a precisely calculated amount of information that a passerby is capable of registering over the course of two seconds.

Today’s Las Vegas, even more different than the one described on the pages of Robert Venturi’s book, is an effusion of an unending Bakhtin’s carnival [21], a house of joy and Disneyland. The cultural carnival is “a world upside down”, a world of inverted values and perverted meanings, a world in which more is allowed, and that which is not is almost beyond the boundaries of language and cognition. The carnival is a time of the death of a specific order, hierarchy and rules, a place in which Huizinga’s *homo ludens* finds their fulfilment and relief, and at the same time an unending encouragement for further entertainment. Las Vegas is, after all, the city of the artificial horizon and unending fun, of dizzying gambling and one night stands. A city that forgives, because *what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas*, and it is therefore an almost perfect embodiment of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept.

² Form follows function.

³ Quote from the afterword by Anna Porębska, p. 222.



Fig. 4. The Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health of the Cleveland Clinic, design by Frank Gehry, Las Vegas, Nevada, 2010; phot. by B. Malinowska-Petelencz

Ewa Rewers wrote that fantasy supported by electronics stimulates and multiplies its internal worlds in the self-sufficient spaces of casinos that gradually transform into environments of virtual and unending consumption [15, p. 137]. In Vegas, the real world disappears, replaced by a virtual version of the nightly world and images that appear truer than reality. The culture of old Europe plays the role of a point of reference here. It is neither imitation nor copying, or even a parody of semantics – wrote Jean Boudrillard in her concept of simulacra. It is rather an abandonment of reality in favour of its signs, the stopping of real processes using their operational copies, using a meta-stable, programmable and infallible machine, which provides all the possible signs of reality [3, p. 7]. The Venetian hotel complex, featuring a shopping mall and casinos, is such a hyperreality⁴, in which imitations and technology reproduce reality, producing an entity that even better. It is a finished space, filled to the brim with icons collected from the most popular European postcards. We can find replicas of the most important elements that make up Venice there – along with the azure sky above the Canale Grande, the gondolas, the Ponte dei Sospiri, the Ponte Rialto and the bell tower of Saint Mark. There are also frescoes on the walls and ceilings of the Palazzo Ducale. Here, reconstructed objects – as Umberto Eco wrote – are marred by the original sin of “neutralising the past and identifying the copy with the original” [5, pp. 11–73]. By creating copies of reality and fabricating realistic originals of the models of Apollo Belvedere, the di Trevi Fountain and Augustus Caesar, we perform an act of forgery and manipulation⁵; This kitsch is therefore a replacement experience, yet one that is striking nonetheless. Kitsch does not require anything but money from its consumers – not even their time [7, pp. 34–49].

⁴ More [in:] [6].

⁵ Eco wrote of the Palace of Living Arts in Buena Park, Los Angeles: *Filozofia właściwa dla Palace nie głosi: „We are giving you the reproduction so you will no longer feel any need for the original. But for the reproduction to be desired, the original has to be idolized, and hence the kitsch function of the inscriptions and the taped voices, which remind you of the greatness of the art of the past”*; quoted [from:] [6, p. 19].



Fig. 5. Las Vegas Library and Discovery Museum, design by Antoine Predock, Las Vegas, Nevada, 1990; phot. by B. Malinowska-Petelenz

3. Size and splendour

However, prestigious and impressive buildings by outstanding architects do get built in Las Vegas. Nevertheless, claiming that they define the city's character and the direction of its development would be far from the truth. Although often built using the best materials and characterised by high class design, they remain difficult to identify in the sea of plastic, excessively colourful logos, flashing, attention-grabbing neon signs or the tangle of meanings, functions and proportions of the entirety of the surroundings. Today, twenty storeys tall hotel buildings and casinos, interspersed with swimming pool complexes and entertainment and congress halls, are taking up larger and larger parts of the city⁶. Fortunately, new avenues and structures of smaller size are being built, such as the aesthetic-shock-inducing, dancing and dynamic, almost Baroque Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health⁷ by Frank Gehry or the Las Vegas Library and Discovery Museum⁸, built according to a design by Antoine Predock.

This last building is a particularly important example of serious and beautiful architecture which has resisted the omnipresent trumpety. The structure, with a rich visual expression,

⁶ More [in:] [18, p. 68].

⁷ The Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health of the Cleveland Clinic, design by Frank Gehry, Las Vegas, Nevada, 2010; academic centre focused on conditions of the brain - particularly Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, which also performs prophylactic checkups for risk group members.

⁸ Las Vegas Library and Discovery Museum, design by Antoine Predock, Las Vegas, Nevada, 1990



Fig. 6. The CityCenter complex, with the Crystals shopping centre in the foreground, design by Daniel Libeskind, 2009; in the background: Veer Towers, design by Helmuth Jahn and Mandarin Oriental, design by Kohn Pedersen & Fox; phot. by B. Malinowska-Petelenz

built according to the modern regional style, is clearly linked – both in form and colour – with the desert environment, in which it was created. Antoine Predock found inspiration in the local architecture of the South West and – similarly as in his other projects – avoided banal reproduction, instead proposing imaginative and highly individual variations on traditional subjects [6, p. 82].

As a part of improving the image of the city, in the very centre, near the Las Vegas Strip, between the famous Bellagio and Park MGM Las Vegas hotels, on 27 hectares, a gigantic, mixed-use complex of casinos and hotels, the CityCenter⁹ has been built. It is composed of six glass tower buildings, each signed with the name of a famous architect, furnished with artworks by world class artists¹⁰ and packed with advanced technologies. Without a doubt, it is the twin Veer Towers (with a residential function, designed by Helmut Jahn) that are the most distinct, slanted by 5 degrees relative to each other¹¹. Two facades in the form of a checkerboard of yellow panels and glass were covered with a veil of metal blinders. The remaining buildings include the Aria Resort & Casino¹² – a gigantic hotel with 4004 rooms, luxurious apartments and a casino composed of two tower buildings built on an arch-shaped plan (of which one was placed from

⁹ Opened in December 2009.

¹⁰ E.g. Nancy Rubins, Franka Stelli, Henry'ego Moore'a, Richarda Longa.

¹¹ More [in:] [18, pp. 152–155].

¹² Aria Resort & Casino, designed by. Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects,



Fig. 7. “The Tree House”, designed by: Rockwell Group, CityCenter complex, design by Daniel Libeskind, 2009; phot. by: B. Malinowska-Petelenz

the front with its convex side, while the other with the concave one), a hotel belonging to the Mandarin Oriental chain¹³, Vdara Hotel & Spa¹⁴ as well as the Harmon Hotel¹⁵. At the base of this gigantic complex are the silvery titanium massings of the Crystals shopping centre by Daniel Libeskind, dynamically shaped as if having been broken up.

In Las Vegas every sensation has to be grand, unforgettable and unique, although situated on a paradoxically common reproduction and repetitiveness. The aforementioned CityCenter is an enormous urban structure, which at first glance should stand out from the gaudy theme park surroundings. It is a closely-packed complex of elegant big city tower buildings with modern silhouettes, standing among low-rise kitschy buildings. However, as it happens, the impact strength of individual forms adjacent to CityCenter has remained dominant. Kitsch and chaos win – using elements that are “purely external, the easiest to claim and put to use” [13, p. 228], generating, in effect, a spatial, urban and architectural anarchy. Not even the considerably-sized “Big Edge” sculpture by Nancy Rubins, standing at the foot of the CityCenter complex, can power through this chaos and hyperstimulation. Rubins’ sculpture looks perfect on photographs, but in reality it blends in and disappears in the context of the excessively colourful and loud space, in which nothing is important, yet each and every element would clearly like to be such.

¹³ Mandarin Oriental, designed by: Kohn Pedersen & Fox,

¹⁴ Vdara Hotel & Spa, designed by RV Architecture,

¹⁵ Harmon Hotel, design by Foster+Partners,

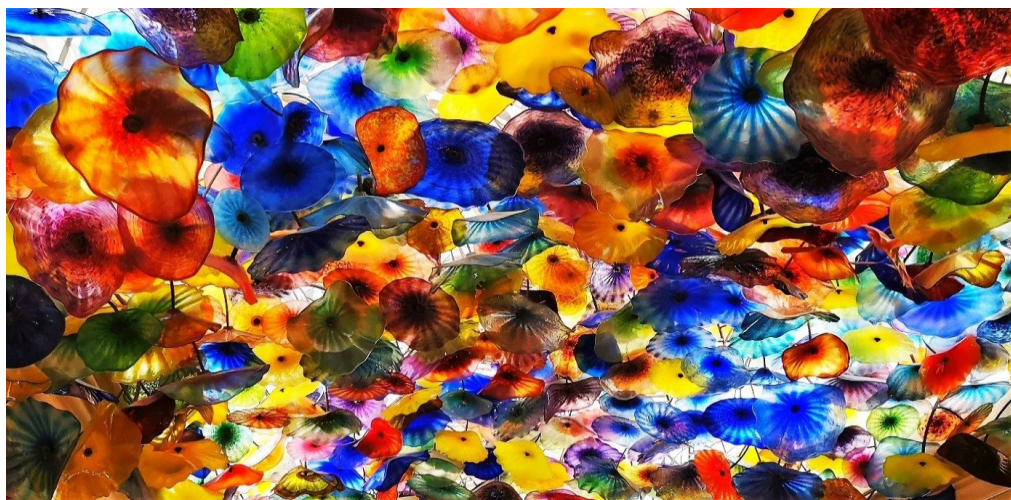


Fig. 8. "Fiori di Como" – suspended glass ceiling by Dale Chihuly, Bellagio casino and hotel, Las Vegas, Nevada, 1998; phot. by B. Malinowska-Petelenz

Just a couple of months ago, the Hotel Palms Casino Resort added the purchase of Damien Hirst's¹⁶ gigantic work "Demon with bowl"¹⁷ (an almost twenty-metres tall sculpture¹⁸ of a headless beast-like athletic figure) to this melting pot of visual stimuli. The building already has a bar designed by Hirst, which features his thirteen-metre long shark in formaldehyde kept in three steel tanks – one of the artist's iconic works. Similarly, Wynn Hotel Las Vegas (designed by Marnell Corrao Associates), which – apart from such banal attractions like a waterfall and a lake inside the building – attracts visitors through fashionable and big art: at present – with a statue of Popeye by Jeff Koons [1]. Koons – ever the chief scandalist of contemporary art¹⁹, one who does not even try to hide his love of kitsch – was a perfect fit for this space.

We can also add the Japanese artist Yayomi Kusama – whose works could be seen at the Bellagio²⁰ hotel for a couple of months²¹ – to the group of eminent artists who perfectly blend in with the hybrid aesthetic of Las Vegas, while still appearing as question marks in the conscious of the arts consumer. The artistic aspirations of this place are also signified by Dale Chihuly, an American sculptor and author of large-format glass installations, who is also the author of the monumental Baroque glass ceiling in the main hall of the famous hotel.

¹⁶ A British artist of the Young British Artists generation

¹⁷ The work's original copy already had its presentation, which took place in 2017 For the purposes of the *Shipwreck of the Unbelievable* exhibition in the museum of the collector Francois Pinault – Palazzo Grassi in Venice, it was made from resin. It was believed that a metal version would be too heavy. After the end of the exhibition the resin statue was destroyed, quoted [from:] [22].

¹⁸ 2017, Venice, Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana, „Treasures from the Wreck” exhibition.

¹⁹ „Made in heaven” is one of his more well-known and kitschy works – a cycle of works inspired with Koons' and his wife's – Ilona Staller, also known as Cicciolina – erotic life. A couple of years after their divorce (the marriage lasted a year) Koons destroyed most of the works.

²⁰ At the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Arts, to be precise.

²¹ Between November 2018 to the end of April 2019.



Fig. 9. Paris Las Vegas – view from Bellagio hotel (photo by B. Malinowska-Petelenz)

Meanwhile, Kusama is a Japanese artist who has lived in a mental institution for many years and is also one of the best-selling active contemporary artists. Polka dots are a distinct element of her works. Kusama loves repetition and simplicity, which she transforms into so-called *Infinity rooms* – spaces that resemble historical mirror galleries, but in the case of Kusama they are without the element of deformation. Ornamentation does appear, however – in small lamps, the aforementioned polka dots and glistening metal details. Such an installation is not simply viewed – it is experienced, by entering it and typically taking dozens of photographs. The matter was similar in the case of the installation in Las Vegas – at the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Arts [23], Kusama exhibited two of her works: “Narcissus Garden”²² and “Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity”. In the first, a room was filled with 750 suspended steel spheres, while in the other, delicate LED lamps. In both cases, ideally infinite, overaestheticised spaces that praise the visitor and place them on a pedestal of the entirety of the experience. And although it is difficult to conclude whether Kusama creates kitsch, design or art of the Instagram generation (infinity rooms are excellent spaces for taking selfies), it is certain that these hybrid works belong to some of the most popular and bestselling artworks around the world, constituting an intriguing field for negotiation between art and entertainment – in both variants creating a high-quality immersive experience.

²² A smaller version of the installation „Narcissus garden”, initially presented in Venice during the 33rd Arte Biennale.

4. Conclusions

Las Vegas is a stunning city. A city that devours, that never has enough fun, lights, money and consumption. It is a city of casinos, of Bugsy, a city of many a film dream – from the classic “Casino” (directed by Martin Scorsese) or “Leaving Las Vegas” (directed by Mike Figgis), through the oneiric “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” (directed by Terry Gilliam), to “The Hangover” (directed by Todd Phillips). Las Vegas is a city that does not sleep, does not fast, does not rest – after all, the show must go on and the louder, the better.

Las Vegas is also a melting pot of the best and worst achievements of the culture of the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century: flooded with plastic and cheap advertisements, but also the best and most expensive of what architecture has to offer. It offers fun from cheap roadside diners, but also *exclusive entertainment* from five-star hotels, in which even the greatest vices take on the character of luxurious and almost elegant amusement. It is also a city that presents front-page art that makes the headlines of sales reports. It is a city of kitsch, camp, wealth and trumpery – a city in which every element of the aesthetic discourse gets a sudden shot of botox, after which everything appears larger, fuller and more engrossing. Right until the end.



Fig. 10. The Strip, Las Vegas, Nevada; drawing by B. Malinowska-Petelenz

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