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Casino Architecture Wars: A History of How Las Vegas Developers Compete with Architectural Design

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores how Las Vegas casino devel opers have competed with architectural design. Throughout history, they emphasized different elements of the casino complex. This paper will examine three of the most heated wars that occurred between casinos over such elements: the swimming pool wars of the 1950s, the sign wars of the 1960s, and the porte cochère wars of the 1970s. This paper argues how, in the face of competition, each of these elements evolved into truly unique forms that differed greatly from other places. In its relentless pursuit to attract visitors, Las Vegas lay on the forefront of architectural experimentation.

Keywords:Las Vegas, casino, architecture, swimming pools, signage, porte cochères

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The Las Vegas Strip has for decades been an important laboratory of architectural design. In hopes to attract people to the Mojave Desert, developers had no choice but to experiment and innovate. Until today, few places have such vast budgets for buildings and millions of people expecting to be entertained. At the same time, the layout of the Las Vegas Strip, where competing companies are in close proximity of another, bred architectural experimentation. Architecture was used as a way to distinguish the companies offering similar services — gambling, accommodation and entertainment — strung around a single street. Just like soap companies compete by different packages, so developers wrapped gambling in different façades.

At heart, it is simple human nature. To call attention to a casino, one owner puts up a sign. The next owner puts up a bigger one. The president of YESCO, Las Vegas most prolific sign company, remembered, "the gamblers would... say, 'You gotta put me up a bigger one than so and so's got down the street.' And it was literally a race. It was a race."[1]

However, developers competed not solely with signs, but used almost the entire palette of casino design, including porte cochères, swimming pools, and even the height of a ceiling. One interior designer noted, "It's always, 'What is the competition doing? If they're doing a 15-feet high ceiling, we better go for twenty feet.'"[2]

In the following, I will briefly examine three of Las Vegas' wars over architectural elements: the 1950s pool race, the 1960s sign race, and the 1970s porte cochère race. During these times, a simple rectangular swimming pool evolved into a letter-shaped oasis with underwater cocktails and Muzak. Signs transformed from a pole and a box to twenty-story tall structures, built out of miles of neon. The porte cochère, traditionally a wooden covered entrance large enough for a vehicle to pass through, grew as long as a football field, covered in mirror-glass and thousands of light bulbs.

The 1950s Pool Race

Tommy Hull, the developer of the Strip's first casino complex, the El Rancho, had exploited the power of the pool as early as 1941. Downtown casinos, built on smaller parcels, did not have the space to put up pools. Not only did Hull include a pool on his more spacious Las Vegas Strip parcel, he made it clear that everyone would notice it. *The Saturday Evening Post* wrote,

> *"Instead of hiding its glittering swimming pool in some patio, they stuck it in their show window, smack on Route 91. It was a stroke of showmanship. No traveler can miss the pool, few can resist it."*[3]

At the time, the drive from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, along the dusty and pot-holed road of Route 91, was rough. Hull's pool offered a welcome stop for automobilists crossing the Mojave Desert. One observer said, "He built the swimming pool up right up next to the highway. This was advertising the coolness of the water. People would stop to take a shower or go swimming."[4]

This was only the prelude of the pool wars that would come to full fruition in the 1950s. The build up was slow. The pool of the 1942 Last Frontier, the second resort of the Las Vegas Strip, lay even closer to the highway. The casino building and the room wings of the 1946 Flamingo were laid out around the pool, so it became the focal point of the resort. Moreover, unlike the Strip's first two pools that had straight edges, the Flamingo pool was scalloped.

The 1950 Desert Inn escalated the pool war. In contrast to the existing rectangular-shaped "square" pools, the Desert Inn's pool was by account, "a turquoise-blue, key-hole shaped triumph."[5] The figure-eight shaped pool introduced curves to Las Vegas pools. Large panes of glass on the ground floor made the pool visible from the inside, as were swimmers and gamblers sipping free daiquiris.

Harper's magazine noted how the Desert Inn pool, the biggest and most curvilinear in Las Vegas to date, ignited a pool race between existing and new casinos, such as the Sands:

> "When Wilbur Clark opened the Desert Inn in 1950 with a fancy pool, the Last Frontier across the highway promptly filled in its old pool and built a heated one of AAU dimensions with a subsurface observation room at the deep end and a deck-side bar. Whereupon the Desert Inn tore up its brand new pool and dug a bigger one. Then The Sands created a thing of free flow design large enough to float a cruiser. (I'm exaggerating, confessedly. Lake Mead is still larger.)[6]

Developers did not mind spending money on pools since they played a major role in their publicity campaigns. "We stress sunshine, good entertainment, and swimming," [7] the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce manager said, without making a single reference to gambling, a practice that still carried stigma at the time. The resorts followed this same strategy. Gaming historian David Schwartz argued, "Loath to mention their gambling, they preferred instead to wax poetic in their advertising copy about the pools, dining, and 'excitement' of a Strip vacation."[8] Many of the chamber's publicity images, the "cheesecake shots," were images of bikini-clad showgirls and celebrities, posing at pools.

The most famous picture was of a floating craps table and poolside slot machines at the Sands, with croupiers, gamblers, and female bystanders all in swimming wear. In 1954, the Sands pool even made it into *Life* magazine as the backdrop for showgirl Kim Smith, who found Las Vegas life a "lark." She said, "There are so many things to do it's hard to choose." In one of the photos, she took a rather awkward pose, described by the caption, "spread-eagled over pool at [the] Sands hotel… during her daily noontime swim." [9]

Las Vegas' emphasis on pools fit in a larger national trend of postwar suburbanization. People moved from downtowns to suburbs partially because they could have space, seclusion, and a pool — a major status

Swimmers gamble at the floating crabs table in the Sands' free-form pool, while a man jumps from the high dive. (Photo from UNLV Special Collections)

symbol, as well as a domestic tool to keep mom, dad, and the kids at home. By 1950, suburbanites added 7,000 pools to the existing 2,500. By 1955, the number of swimming pools in the United States had reached 26,000[10] and would explode exponentially that year, since banks now gave out loans to build pools, qualifying them as forms of home improvements.

In 1955, back on the Las Vegas Strip, the new Dunes included a 150 feet long reflection pool with fountains, which led to a V-shaped swimming pool that featured three sea horses. The New Frontier built a glass-enclosed observation chamber at the bottom of the pool so that non-swimming guests could watch floating friends. "Where else in all the world but Las Vegas," a local newspaper wrote, "could Mr. and Mrs. Joe Doakes, of Wichita, Kansas, enjoy cocktails under water?"[11]

But the Dunes was only one of three that resorts opening in Las Vegas that year, each with Olympic size swimming pools, and Las Vegas was forced to draw water from Lake Mead.[12] Surface water evaporation of desert swimming pools contributed to the local springs drying up. The same year, the lake dropped almost 20 feet.

This did not stop developers, however. The 1956 Hacienda built the largest pool on the Strip in the shape of a yet untried letter of the alphabet, a "Z." That following year, the Tropicana built a half-moon shaped pool with a brand new feature that was difficult to top: underwater Muzak.

The 1960s Battle of the Spectaculars

In 1963, Tom Wolfe was ecstatic at what he saw in Las Vegas. At a visit of YESCO's office, 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 skyscraper, topped by a spiral. This incredible form fit perfectly in his expedition for *Esquire* investigating "the new culture-makers" of "popular" society, which had brought him to a hot rod and custom car show featuring a kid who built a golden motorcycle called "The Golden Alligator."

"I don**'**t know… It**'**s sort of a nose effect. Call it a nose," 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

The Las Vegas mayor and a showgirl stand among other dignitaries on scaffolding at the Stardust sign's lighting-up ceremony, a customary event held for each new sign of significance. (Photo from UNLV Special Collections)

stories high above a two-story building," he 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 the small building was a remodeling of Lucky Strike Casino, which opened in 1963 as Lucky Casino, the sign had become the building, and, at 153 feet, it was the tallest structure in Las Vegas, rising up above all of Fremont Street. At Lucky Casino, the sign had become such a large and unique architectural shape, even critics could not fail to notice.

As sign–buildings soared all over Las Vegas, Tom Wolfe rose to the occasion.

> … Las Vegas is the only town in the world whose skyline is made up neither of buildings, like New York, nor trees, like Wilbraham, Massachusetts, but signs. One can look at Las Vegas from a mile away on Route 91 and see no buildings, no trees, only signs. But such signs! They tower. They revolve, they oscillate, they soar in shapes before which the existing vocabulary of art history is helpless.[13]

A year after his visit, a new sign for the Dunes escalated the sign race on the Strip. At 181 feet tall, it was the largest freestanding electric sign in the world, as tall as the Leaning Tower of Pisa. It was designed by Lee Klay, corporate art director of Federal Sign Company. He reported that the Dunes management said, "I want a big phallic symbol going up in the sky as far as you can make it."[14]

The Dunes sign raised the bar for vertical signs on the Strip. Exceeding the Flamingo's 80-foot tall champagne cylinder (1953), the 126-foot trylon of New Frontier (1955), the 127-foot sign of the Sahara

(1959), and even the downtown 153-foot Lucky Sign (1963), it took the sign race to another height. All four designed by YESCO, The Federal Sign and Signal Company's Dunes sign had also represented the first serious challenge to YESCO's monopoly.

But casinos were not solely measured by the length of their signs in full erection. Among sign designers, the Dunes sign was respected for its "contained design and use of positive and negative space, the use of light to make it look taller than its 181 feet and the way it fills the area at which you are looking."[15] Klay had designed not a simple shaft but a figure made of two white pylons that rose up to form a bulbous shape evoking an onion dome — it held two-story tall Dunes letters and a shimmering diamond, the size of a car. Besides being of an entirely different order of magnitude, the Dunes sign made for an appealing silhouette.

The new Dunes sign was also a lot more in-your-face. A total of 624,683 watts or 3 miles of neon tubing and 7,200 electric lamps made it a significant upgrade from the Dunes' old sign, a 30-feet fiberglass Sultan with a single headlight that shone into the night — to the pleasure of General Electric, who awarded it the Sign of the Year.

The Dunes' overwhelming sign made it clear to everyone that the tall freestanding pylon sign, placed along the road, was excellent at attracting attention from a distance. It was what one sign designer called the "Golden Age" of signage in Las Vegas.[16]

So hot was the demand for signs, California design companies set up shop in Las Vegas. They broke YESCO's monopoly on the Las Vegas sign market. Where first designers within one firm only, YESCO, would compete for a client, now competition existed between three firms: YESCO, Federal Sign Company, and Ad-Art. The competition was cutthroat, since sign designers worked speculatively, and only got paid after they got the commission — unlike architects who got paid to develop the design of a building. Under these competitive conditions, with extremely large budgets, the neon sign reached its summit, with sophisticated shapes, structures, and animation sequences.

YESCO's Larsen Jr. won the competition for the 1966 Aladdin sign with a doodle that appeared straight out of a Disney cartoon. A string of hundreds of golden cylinders — secretly made out of beer cans — gradually curled up to a revolving three-sided whiteboard, holding a fountain spraying gold and floating a light-bulb covered oil lamp. For its voluptuous figure, it was dubbed the "ice cream chair."

The Larsen Jr.'s sign quickly became the poster child of the resort — the architectural counterpart to Elvis, who married in the Aladdin the following year, and became somewhat of a permanent fixture in the casino. The sign even made it to the cover of the 1968 March issue of *Architectural Forum,* photographed by Denise Scott Brown, a Yale architecture professor. "With pieces of Aladdin hauled into a gallery, one could invent an artist worth marketing,"[17] *Art Forum* reported.

The Frontier's new pillar competed with its length. At 184-foot, it was three feet taller than the Dunes, taking over its record of the world's tallest freestanding sign. The shape of a crucifix, it carried a heavy bar cantilevering far out on either side of the sign carrying 16-foot tall Frontier letters — X marks the spot.

Ad Art's Paul Miller won the design for the Stardust's new sign. He had reportedly scribbled his idea, a star cloud, with his Prisma pencil on a small 2.5-inch "rough" during a brown-bag lunch.[18] It was almost followed to the letter. A few months and half a million dollars later, it stood 188 feet tall, topping The Frontier as the newest, tallest freestanding sign in the world. Among sign designers, the sign was particularly respected for its "beautiful program," its animation sequence, which included actions such as "sweeps," "washdowns," and random "scintillation"[19]— sign design lingo for flickering.

The two legs supporting the cloud — one containing an elevator for maintenance — were painted sky blue, so the cloud seemed to float during the day. The legs were not lit at night, so the cloud effect persisted. Appreciated by designers, the public, and art critics alike, the sign appeared on the cover of *Art in America* 1972. It was the only commercial sign bestowed that honor.

In 1968, Ad-Art's Bill Clark won the commission for the Flamingo's new sign with the tallest single shaft-sign in the world, 130 feet tall, feathering out in shades of pink, salmon, and blush. Once again, General Electric was thrilled with all this light business — a total of 2 miles of neon tubing and 6,000 light bulbs — awarding it the General Electric Sign Award.

With the Flamingo sign, the "Golden Age" of signage had come to an end. In a period of a few years,

the Strip added five giant signs to its oeuvre. The Strip made signs in Ginza and Broadway seem small. "Bold and big as the signs in Times Square are, they still lack the artistic sophistication and pizzazz of the Las Vegas mega-signs,"[20] noted one Stanford art history professor. The Strip had turned into a public gallery of pop art, with the world's three tallest electric pieces: the onion dome, the crucifix, and the star cloud; and the world's tallest single shaft, the plumed feather, and that elusive beauty: the ice cream chair.

The neon "spectacular" had come a long way in Las Vegas, developed from "a pole and a box." Although these signs had no other purpose than to shock and awe, they were deemed so important that a "lighting-up ceremony" was held for each new sign — a ritual in which typically the hotel president, the mayor, and a few showgirls climbed up the sign in front of a delirious audience.

Even cultural architectural theorists like Robert Venturi were so delighted by the Strip's sign-architecture they claimed architects should *learn* from Las Vegas.[21] As a result, the city became the birthplace of Postmodernism, influencing architects worldwide.

But as impressive as the "spectaculars" were, they were an amplification of a simple credo. "In the sign business there's an expression that 'Lights attract the moths'" Chuck Barnard said, the president of Ad-Art. "That's a crude way of putting it, but basically it's true. People are attracted to glitter and lights."[22]

The 1970s Porte Cochère Wars

A porte cochère, literally "carriage gate" in French, stands for a portico structure at a building entrance, providing cover to horse and carriage passengers. It was a common feature of 18th century mansions and public buildings, for instance Buckingham Palace. But with the 20th century ubiquity of the automobile, it had increased in relevance. The 1947 Thunderbird introduced the porte cochère to the Strip, providing a welcoming gesture to automobilists and marking the transition between the highway and the entrance. It quickly became a new element of the casino complex.

But in the face of competition, the Las Vegas porte cochère quickly evolved. While porte-cocheres are typically made out of marble, stone, stucco, or wood and designed by architects, during the 1970s, Las Vegas' sign designers dotted them with light bulbs. To amplify the glitz, they plastered them with mirror glass, brass plating and fiberglass simulating expensive finishes. As a bonus of all this plexiglass and polished aluminum, Las Vegas glittered by night as well as by day.

During this time, Las Vegas developers gradually expanded existing low-rise casinos with high-rise towers. With large buildings crowding the Las Vegas skyline, vertical signs had less impact. The porte cochère, on the other hand, while not visible from afar, from up close, underneath all the mirrors and light-bulbs, brought guests into an elevated state. And so, by the late 1970s, Las Vegas developers shifted their focus from neon vertical pylons to plastic horizontal planes, with maximum levels of sheen.

The 1966 Aladdin was the first to treat its porte cochère as a neon sign. It simulated an Islamic dentate cornice, featuring individual red neon letters of "Aladdin," written in an Eastern brush font, placed on red neon hexagons.

The 1973 MGM Grand, however, took it to another level. To help set the luxurious 1920s movie palace context, Stern had built a gigantic 100 by 300 foot porte cochère, as long as a football field, wide enough to cover eight lanes and an army of valet boys. He decorated its sides with incandescent lights placed in mirrored vacuum formed plastic, a new material used by the sign industry, to amplify the glitz. He added two ceiling chambers bathing in light bulbs. Underneath it all, he placed a fountain lined with floral-decorated railings that were deliberately overscaled to match the massive canopy, and plunked an 800-pound marble replica of Bologna's Neptune and sirens in the middle, adding mermaids shooting water from their breasts.

"The Grand awes you first with sheer size," the *New York Times* architecture critic wrote. "There is a vast Moorish-Bauhaus-Italian Renaissance porte-cochere in the front, with fountains and bad statuary all about."[23] Nevertheless, the critic noted the important purpose it played, existing "not for any structural reason, but because of particular associations that are designed to evoke in us some sort of emotional response… The goal here is… to provide the illusion that one has left his or her normal life and become a character in a movie."

Neptune, sirens, and mermaids shooting water from their breasts stand underneath MGM Grand's porte cochère, the size of a football field. (Photo from UNLV Special Collections)

Since it hardly rains in Las Vegas, MGM's massive porte cochère did not really provide a practical purpose. However, it had solved a difficult problem. With thousands of guests, and 4,500 employees, the MGM Grand relied on computers to modernize hotel reservations, food and beverage requests, casino bookkeeping and credit. Previously, a patron's line of credit had been based on the casino manager's estimation of his assets, which required a personal relationship between the two, and casino employees knowing patrons by name. While this new operations strategy would lead to a less personal and intimate atmosphere, the porte-cochere would help guests feel important, as if they were attending a red carpet movie premiere. It fast became a staple of casino design in the budding computer age.

Architecture critic Allan Hess identified the 1973 MGM Grand as the moment when the porte cochère "replaced the road side sign in projecting the primary imagery of a Strip hotel."[24] It ignited a war. The 1975 Aladdin porte cochère, out of envy of MGM Grand's giant brass canopy, was practically a free standing building standing over the access-road: twelve Doric columns carried the gold polished ceiling as large as

an Olympic swimming pool, with three chandelier fixtures, each the size of a truck. One art critic reported, "The new Las Vegas look 'brings the outside inside.'"[25]

Finally, in this war for the most pompous and illuminated porte cochère, a hybrid between a vertical sign and a canopy appeared: the 1977 Silverbird sign. Costing $1.8 million, it was the most expensive sign to date, and also the most reflective, featuring wings covered in mirror glass and sparkling light bulbs. If one structure came closest to Liberace, this was it.

Conclusion

From a "nose" building to a ten-story "ice-cream chair," from a "Z" shaped pool to underwater Muzak, from mirrored canopy wings to truck-sized chandeliers, Las Vegas was a laboratory for design

Until today, developers continue to experiment with elements of the casino complex to compete. Pool wars are hotter than ever, as the swimming pool, rimmed with three-story cabanas, has become the central features of nightclubs and "day clubs." Signs are no longer built of neon, but are massive electronic screens projecting videos and sound. Only the automobile-oriented porte cochère has diminished in importance, since the Las Vegas Strip has become an increasingly dense and pedestrian place. Instead, the sidewalk offers a new realm of competition, with developers fighting over pedestrians, building promenades and plazas with shade-structures the shape of a tulip, blown up five-stories tall.

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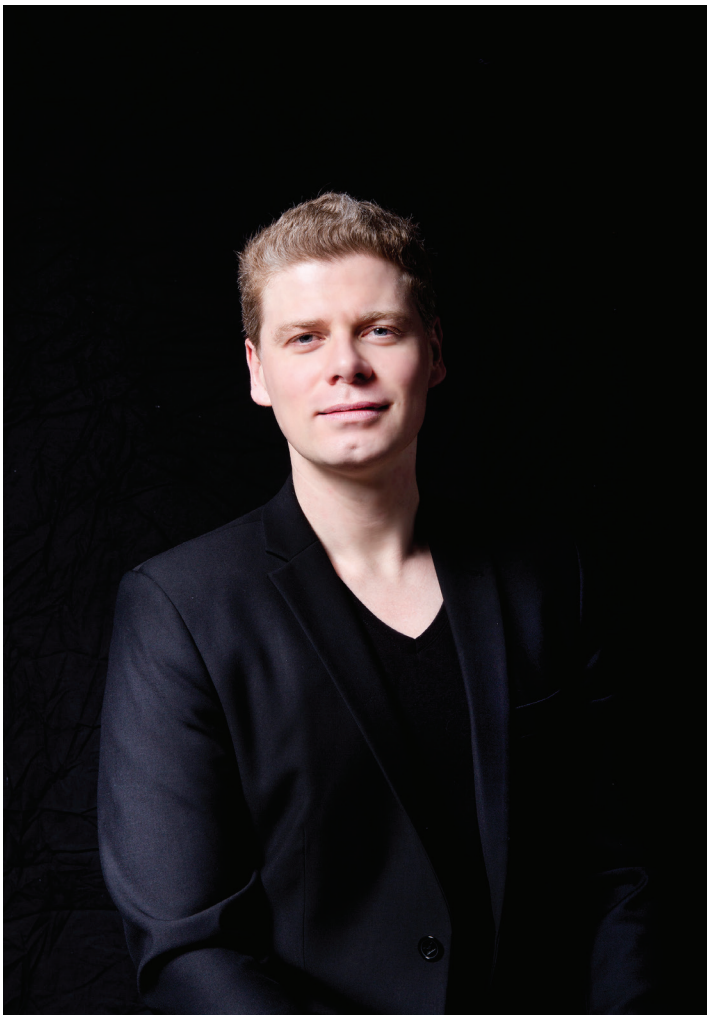

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Stefan Al is a Dutch architect, urban designer, and Associate Professor of Urban Design at the University of Pennsylvania. His books include *Factory Towns of South China* and *Villages in the City.* He is currently writing a book on Las Vegas called *The Evolution of the Las Vegas Strip*.

In an international career to date, Al has worked on renowned architectural projects such as the 2,000-feet high Canton Tower in Guangzhou, the preservation of world heritage in Latin America at the World Heritage Center of UNESCO, and an 11,000-acre new eco-friendly city in India.

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