

Book Review

The Strip: Las Vegas and the Architecture of the American Dream.

By Stefan Al
The MIT Press
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272 pages. Indexed.

In *The Strip: Las Vegas and the Architecture of the American Dream*, Stefan Al analyzes the development of the Las Vegas Strip through the lenses of its architectural styles, connecting them with different stages of American history, starting from the 1940s. Beautiful pictures and an enjoyable writing style—particularly rich in historical and architectural details—guide the reader through a journey that touches on several aspects. From urban development to gaming regulation, from demographic changes to the dynamism of United States' economy, Al's analysis gives an overview that is helpful to understand not only the complexity of the Strip, but also sociological transformations in American society.

In the first chapter, *Wild West (1941-1946)*, Al explains how the Old West style played a fundamental role in the architecture of the earliest Las Vegas casinos, focusing on the first half of the 1940s. In doing so, the author gives an overview on the history of the city, touching on important happenings such as the legalization of gambling in Nevada and the construction of Hoover Dam. Al highlights how in those years, as it happens today, entrepreneurs decided to theme their gambling spaces. Al argues that the Old West style was not only aesthetically appealing, but it was also a tribute to Las Vegas's frontier days.

The second chapter, *Sunbelt Modern (1946-1958)*, focuses on the birth of the Strip, which Al defines as the epitome of suburbanization. Starting from the second half of the 1940s, the heart of Las Vegas moved from Downtown to a suburban area, the so-called Strip. Those were the years, Al explains, of the mob-run casinos, such as the Flamingo, whose pools, bungalows, and shows made Las Vegas become the "Entertainment Capital of the World." One of the most interesting aspects of this chapter is how the author connects factors like political-economic changes and the pursuit of the American dream to Las Vegas's economic boom.

The third chapter, *Pop City (1958-1969)*, could be defined as the heart of the book, where Al painstakingly uses his architectural knowledge to describe how a new kind of cosmetic architecture gave life to the so-called pop phase of Las Vegas. Here, the author focuses on interesting themes, such as the idea of a mass-production of the Strip that opened the door to middle-class tourism. The reader is taken on a detailed journey through fundamental steps in Las Vegas's history, such as atomic tests, the opening of the Caesars Palace, and the publication of the groundbreaking book *Learning from Las Vegas*, by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

The fourth chapter, *Corporate Modern (1969-1985)*, describes the moment in which financial interests started to influence the shape of places. Al explains that, starting from 1969, new gaming laws that brought consistent amounts of capital to Las Vegas and the interventions of corporations like Hilton created new hospitality models for Las Vegas.

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This happened especially in terms of architecture. The author specifies how, through the use of technology, this new phase also modernized the gaming industry. Noteworthy in this chapter are also the portrayals of important personalities such as Howard Hughes and Kirk Kerkorian, followed by an interesting comparison with the design school of Bauhaus.

The fifth chapter, *Disneyland (1985-1995)*, gives an overview on the influence that Disneyland had on Las Vegas's hospitality models and architecture. Al explains how, starting from the second half of the eighties, Las Vegas began to focus on families and baby boomers, becoming the capital of themed attractions. Al is once again able to connect transformations in Las Vegas's hotels and casinos with broader socio-economic changes, such as the 1970s deregulation of consumer interest rates. The author concludes this chapter with a reflection on the term "Disneyfication" and its critiques.

In the sixth chapter, *Sim City (1995-2001)*, Al describes how, in the 1990s, postmodernist architecture became more focused on replicas of cultural heritage. Al explains that replicas of locations such as Venice and Paris raised the critiques of theorists, who defined the Strip as "fake." The author carefully analyzes the stress in the authentic-inauthentic debate that still surrounds the city today.

The seventh and last chapter, *Starchitecture (2001-Present)*, explains the transition from the heritage-replica ages to contemporary art and architecture. In this section, Al is able to connect important elements of contemporary society to the new hotels and casinos that we find on the Strip today. With his detailed description, Al touches on aspects such as museums, celebrity culture, and public spaces, and in doing so, reviews topics that are fundamental in contemporary urban studies, ranging from the importance of public spaces to environmental debates.

In the concluding section of the book, Al argues that "America has changed along with Las Vegas" (p. 221). This chapter leaves the reader with a feeling that something more, especially in terms of the relationship between sociological changes and architecture, could have been written in this section. However, Al's work definitively fills a gap in today's scholarship. Although some topics he mentions are reiterated from other scholars' works on Las Vegas, this book makes a strong contribution in terms of going beyond architecture for architecture's sake. As several experts started arguing in the past years (Borer, 2017; Dickens 2011; Milligan, 2007; Moehring & Green 2005), it is important to look at topics like architecture as interconnected with the broader context. Al does so by looking at Las Vegas's architecture as intertwined with society, economy, urbanism, and other important themes. His book makes the reader view resorts and casinos as mirrors that reflect historical transformations and global changes. This aspect is important not only in giving a new, refreshing view of the Strip, but also in bringing to the surface that those attractions that often are defined as mere fake façades offer much more to reflect on.

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