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## Las Vegas: The perils of deception fueled growth

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# ***LAS VEGAS: THE PERILS OF DECEPTION-FUELED GROWTH***

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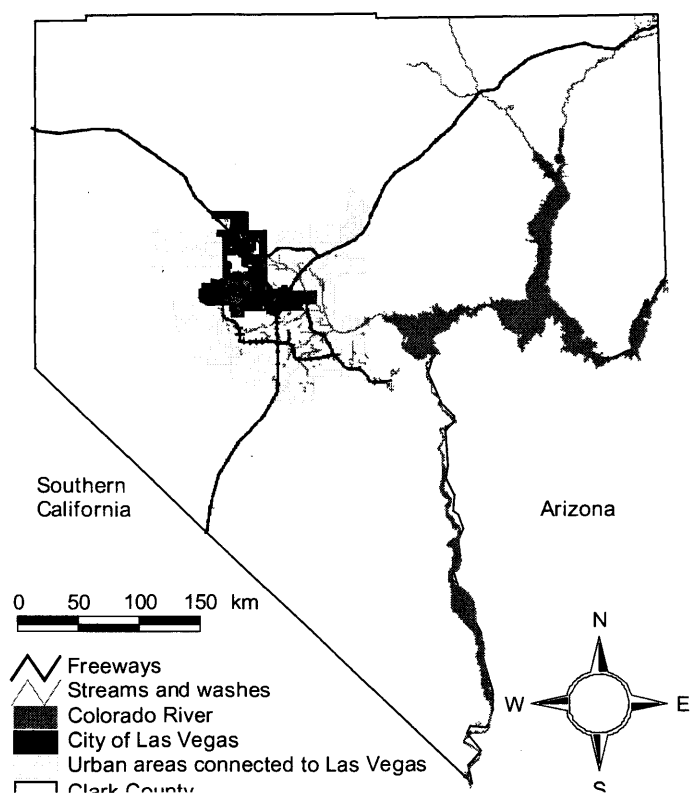
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There are two types of deception – the deception of others and self-deception. Las Vegas thrives on both. Many would be aware of the importance of the first type of deception for the health of the Las Vegas economy, as they would for Macau, Monte Carlo, etc. Without the symbol of wealth to achieve elite global tourism status, and the ‘moth to the flame’ illusion of the likelihood of visitors to get ‘lucky’ and win great wealth, there would be no Las Vegas as it is known today. There is no other major reason to come to the city. There is no major natural resource to encourage development – no river like the Thames of England or Pasig of the Philippines cutting through, nor large mammal populations passing through ‘fruited plains’ as was once the case in the middle of the U.S., and certainly no close proximity to the productive estuaries or forests – little that would make major development inevitable. Only a few springs attracted people in early years, many of which were pumped to extinction as development increased (Deacon 2007) (Figure 1). Yet, Las Vegas occupies a unique place in global culture, buoyed by the deceptive notion that it offers a shortcut to wealth; and the far more realistic promise that it can meet most person’s hedonistic, if not repressed, desires with enough geographic disconnection from the homes of visitors to keep activities discrete. This is the ‘deal’ the city cuts with visitors.

What may not be so widely understood is the self-deception which is a main pillar of living in Las Vegas. Self-deception in the sense that the city is

addicted to arguably ephemeral gambling-based growth which both yields jobs in the entertainment/gaming industries, and in construction. Construction has thrived on creating structures for these industries and the residents that work in them, as well as by feeding on the housing speculation fueled in great part by investors

**Figure 1**



from outside the city. There is no effort to match growth to the environmental and economic realities of this city in the desert, no growth rings, etc. And, the development model that has fueled Las Vegas is now under scrutiny, as the cranes on 'the strip' are not moving due to the bursting of the global economic bubble. Even strip development such as CityCenter, "Destined to be one of the great urban places of the world" according to its builders, MGM and Dubai World, is in critical condition. As of this spring, the unfinished \$8.6 billion project, the largest privately financed construction one in US history, appeared headed for bankruptcy (de la Merced 2009).

Through implementation of high, if not 'appropriate' technology, as well as with the collection of massive gambling losses from people around the globe, the city has sustained itself and the inflow of people to this point, but the odds are stacked against it for a healthy future. In a place where development is built on an undiversified and externally-oriented economy of entertainment, sex and construction, the impact of slowed growth is paralyzing. Given that its model of development is centered on excess, fantasy and perceived 'luck,' a critical self-examination of its condition is prudent.

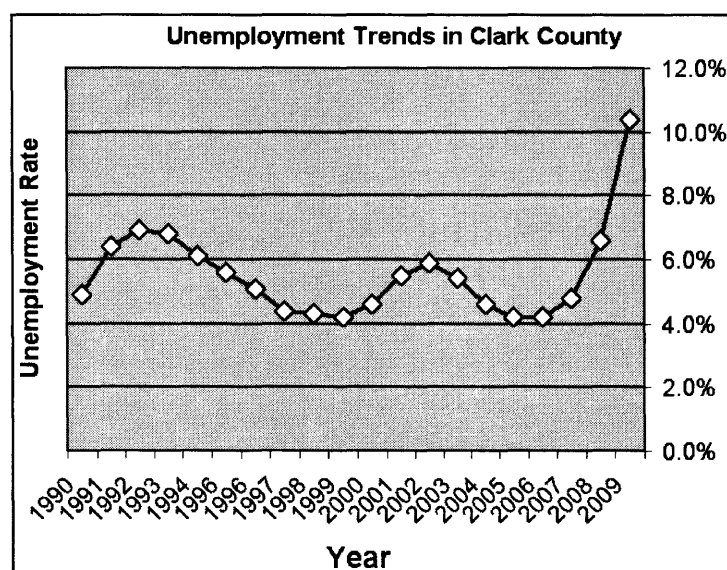
Las Vegas has also run headlong into a sustainability dilemma that many in the city appear to find sacrilege to acknowledge. Growth is assumed to be positive at any rate possible. No local high-profile party has a vested interest in any other policy, and the federal government considers growth to be a local matter. Balance is lacking. Thus, what is on the table instead, is simply how to obtain more resources (i.e. water) to make unlimited growth possible. Ideas on the table for the Southern Nevada Water Authority include bringing in water from as far away as the middle of the U.S. from the Mississippi River, cloud seeding which has already been tested towards the top of the country in Wyoming to obtain credits, and desalinization of ocean water pumped far up the Lower Colorado River Basin from Mexico, and this is just scraping the 'brainstorming' surface. While citizens may assume the purveyor's main goal is sustainability because it does foster conservation, it is not, its job is to get more water to sell to customers.

### Setting and Resource Sustainability

The dysfunctional place of Las Vegas in nature explains much of its struggle to offer a high quality of life for its residents, and its peculiar place in the global scene. It may come as a surprise to many in the world that there is a city the size of Baltimore, USA in the middle of the Mojave Desert. The population numbers vary depending on whether one includes adjoining areas, or just Las Vegas proper, however, the point is that close to 2 million people are living in a space that *never before was capable of providing for the needs of even a medium size stationary population*. Las Vegas has grown from being the 72nd largest city in the U.S. in 1980 to being 28th in 2007 (U.S Census Bureau 2009, City-Data 2009; infoplease 2009). To give a sense of the flow of people to Las Vegas, it is worth noting that in the year 2000 the percentage of residents who were born in Nevada was only 19.7%. The ethnic distribution of the city population is mostly white, but a high percentage of the population is Hispanic, Asian, and African, with a small but noticeable population of Native Americans and Hawaiians (U.S Census Bureau 2009).

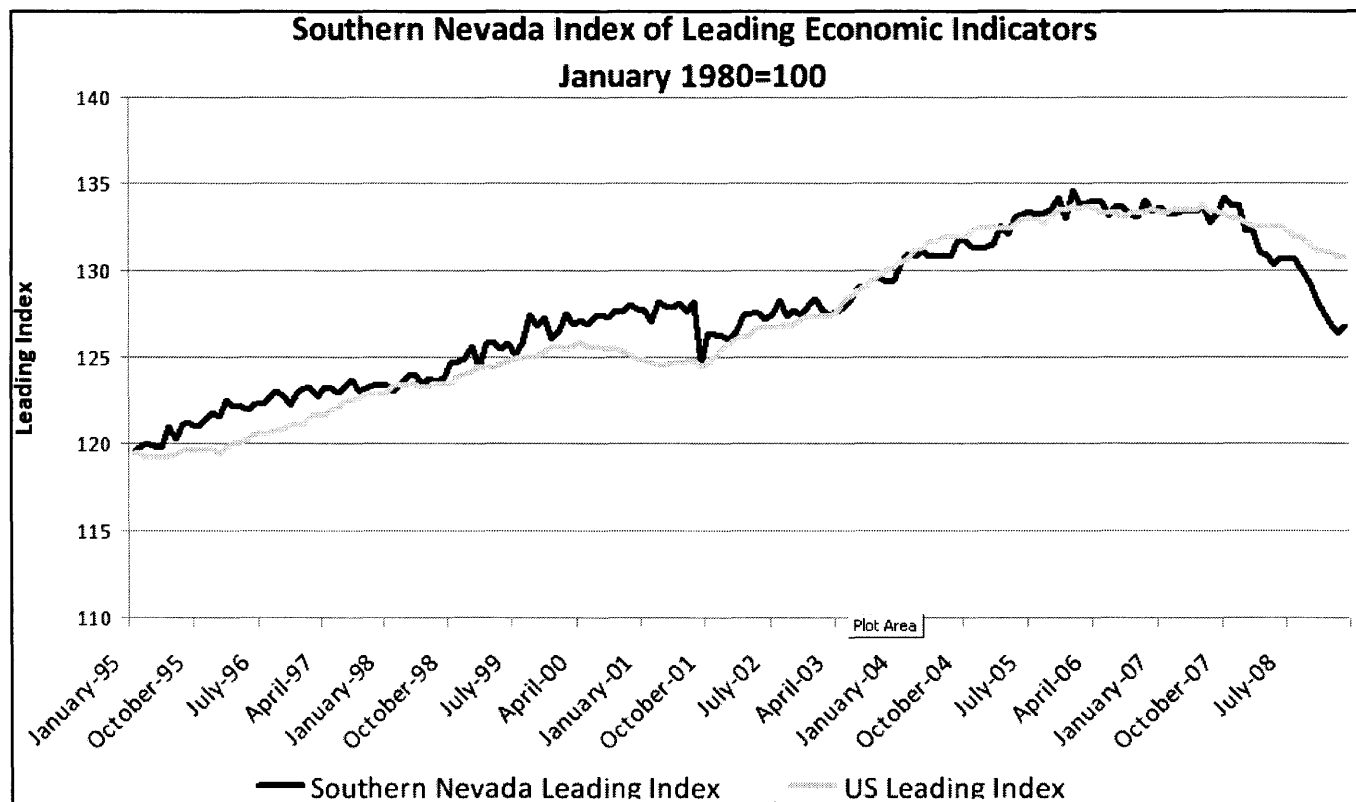
Nested in the middle of a desert that stretches across the states of California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona, and a short drive from Death Valley, temperatures are extreme, sometimes reaching 51 degrees Celsius in the summer, though winter can bring snow. And, between

Figure 2. Clark County Unemployment



(Source: From NV Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation 2009.)

Figure 3. Southern Nevada Index of Leading Economic Indicators relative to the U.S.



(Source: Adopted from The Center for Business and Economic Research 2009.)

the effects of the urban heat island and climate change, extreme high temperatures will worsen. Accordingly, the energy needs and carbon footprint of the city for both residential cooling and its famed 24 hour entertainment infrastructure are immense, as is the case for food supply. It is highly unusual that Las Vegas is a 4.5 hour drive from any major source of its food – the time it takes to cross some countries, though ironically its famed buffets offer massive quantities of exotic food from around the world, and no doubt yield their own mind-boggling carbon footprint per calorie. If one were to ‘buy local,’ there would be no buying at all — virtual water imports are voluminous. And most importantly, the Lower Colorado River, the main source of city water, is over-allocated, and with only a few centimeters of rain per year, the city is desperate for more water to meet the needs of its burgeoning population (Smith, Jr. 2009; Piechota et al. 2004). As a whole, city development has been the antithesis of “Designing with Nature.” But national planning is non-existent, Americans build where they please, and there is no cross-state institution in the U.S. for supporting residential water conservation, as it is a local matter.

Although this text is not a sustainability paper per se, the facts above are worth leading with, as they loom over life in Las Vegas on a daily basis in terms of its governance, resource management, economic opportunities, vulnerability, and quality of life. In fact, were it not for mafia interest in a place to operate with relative impunity, the city would have likely never turned out to be a major urban area. Yet, the entertainment and sex industry legacy of the mob *still* defines the economy of Las Vegas, in great part due to the lack of water for other industries such as the highly desired silicon industry.

### Social Dimensions

After many years of living off of the fat of the global economy, Las Vegas is now at the epicenter of the (speculative) housing and employment global meltdown. Changes in unemployment levels are extreme in the last few years (Figure 2). And, whereas, Las Vegas did well relative to the rest of the nation in leading economic indicators in recent years, perhaps through the effect of that same speculation, the city has taken a precipitous fall well below national trends, as can be seen in figure 3

(The Center for Business and Economic Research 2009). Crime, not surprisingly, is high under these conditions, but has decreased since the 1980s (FBI 2009). (The city's mayor, an ex-mafia lawyer, has generously offered to cut-off the thumbs of offending graffiti artists.)

Education is a major factor in economic diversification and opportunity to improve one's quality of life. Its importance to local economies should not be underestimated. However, as of the time of this writing, the state of Nevada faces such a massive budget crisis that pay cuts have been ordered for Assistant Professors and tenured faculty face the equivalent in workload increases. Previously, due to what appears to have been scare tactics by state government, what was on the table over the past year had been the possibility of cutting whole departments in the university system.

Nevertheless, budget cuts for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), unusual as the only major university for 4 hours in any direction, have impacted its capacity to meet student's educational needs. Given that Las Vegas is towards the bottom of national education performance in terms of both grade school scores and university graduation rates, a disinvestment in higher education seems intellectually, and possibly, economically suicidal. In 2006, out of 15 most similar institutions, UNLV ranked in the bottom  $\frac{1}{4}$ , with a rating of 39.2% graduation rate, whereas the top 3 universities are over 54% (The Educations Trust 2009). (Ironically, in times of revenue stress local discussion on public radio and other sources often turns back to the hotel and gaming industries and how they might be taxed to increase revenues.)

There was a time when the importance of education was likely lost to many in Las Vegas because the economy was so 'hot.' For example, it was not unusual for students to be able to earn \$40,000-\$50,000 as a casino valet. Economic growth anesthetized many to the needs for a strong educational base, in much the way that Ophulus and Boyan (1992) believe growth has served in the U.S. as a substitute for developing mature politics and to facing major problems especially in relation to equity.

When one adds the economic and educational pictures to the common culture found across Las Vegas it hardly builds an encouraging big picture for families. Driving through Las Vegas highways one can see large billboards in close succession offering a chance to shoot a machine gun, go to strip clubs, and tryout for pornographic movies. If residents get close to the strip they are assailed by mobs of persons handing-out and littering the streets with pornographic brochures. The point here is not to moralize sex. In fact, the sex industry far too complicated for that kind of treatment. However, many people who come from around the country simply are not prepared for the inundation of their senses with this type of input. This helps build the sort of love/hate relationship between the adult industries that bring visitors here and help pay the way for schools being built, etc., and the criminal, and in some person's minds, unethical influences attached to that same money/people. Certainly we are not the first to write about this type of love/hate relationship in tourist-dependant areas. However, for a city of around 2 million people to cope with this tension each day is intriguing, and it does impact city's culture.

**Figure 4. Bellagio Fountains in Las Vegas**



(Source: Bellagio Hotel.)

### Internal Divides

This article began with the concept of deception. When most visitors come to Las Vegas, a key attraction is the Bellagio Fountains (Fig. 4). The fountains are amazing, rising as high as some buildings and moving rhythmically to the music that bathes onlookers in sound, while an opulent backdrop of exquisite restaurants and casino architecture play in the background. Within approximately 3 km of the

fountains there are 4 golf courses (with golf ponds). Yet, the image of the fountains and its surroundings are in direct contradiction to the 'real' Las Vegas. Las Vegas is not a wet, lush place full of the elite. However, its population participates in the charade because it is vital to the economy, not because anyone thinks it prudent to have massive fountain shows and golf courses in the desert, never mind the immense use of water in the hotels. Las Vegas *needs* to pretend to be something it is not to survive – an onerous burden for a city.

Self-deception continues in throughout the valley. In the relatively wealthy quazi-suburbs in the western part of the city and elsewhere residents lock themselves behind gated communities, some with their own security. So many new developments have gates that this is a dominant feature once off of the strip and when not in poor neighborhoods such as those in the center and north of the city. Behind these mammoth gates, the streets in some wealthy neighborhoods have grass and flowers on their center strips, the foliage all around creates landscapes that seem more like New York State than Nevada, and large swimming pool-Jacuzzi combinations fill the wide grass yards which are often also adorned with fountains. This is not the desert...

Juxtapose this life style with the rest of the Las Vegas Valley and frustrating contradictions arise. There are rate schedules and campaigns to reduce water consumption per capita in the area. Yet, people in the wealthy neighborhoods have created their own water-based fantasy land and consume large amounts of energy in the process. Their large homes often must possess 2 or more large air conditioners to function. And, it is likely that these persons, along with visitors, use the areas remarkably *large* number of desert golf courses which are found in and around the city in all sizes. Yet, the city has many American and immigrant persons just trying to get by and avoid being evicted from their homes, now that the surplus jobs of a hot construction economy are gone. Homelessness, particularly of teenagers, is high. And while the housing complex once made an overnight fortune from speculation (another form of gambling!), its marketing now reflects the new reality in Vegas. This includes the over-pricing of homes, remarkably high foreclosure rates in what feels like every neighborhood, and high rent when the home is lost. This all makes life difficult for the average citizen, and also widens the split

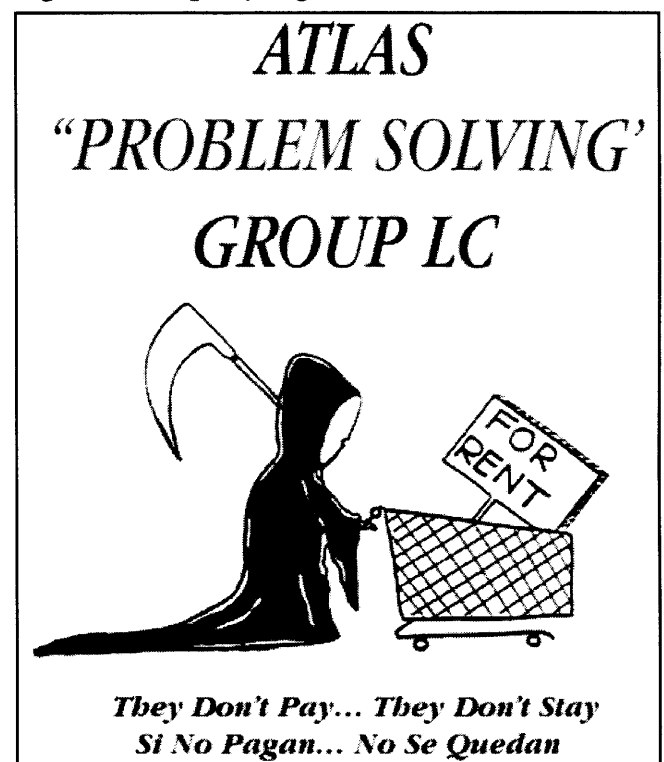
in vulnerability between the relatively wealthy renting homes to the less-wealthy. Adding this together with the aforementioned cultural and economic tensions allows one to get a sense of why Las Vegas is now a pretty tough place to live in – and to be blunt, based on living there, rude, once off of the strip. Figure 5 epitomizes the tension that is being incubated between classes.

### Conclusion

Las Vegas is promoted as "Sin City," because it pays to do so. The city slogan, "what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas," reflects the desperate over-dependence on gambling-fueled growth. If visitors due not come to the city, its development falls like a house of cards. Residents require the symbol of Las Vegas to carry on with their lives; yet, they must also stay in the city and deal with the repercussions of choices made on the basis of that mindset.

There are arguments that this conundrum reflects poor governance, weak economic planning, or moral depravity. The point of this paper is not to argue any of these positions. And, undeniably, people enjoy the unique adult entertainment that the city has to offer, or

Figure 5. Property mgt. flier sent to author 2009.



they would not travel to the city from across the globe to pay for it. However, in deconstructing Las Vegas, it remains difficult to imagine a positive future for the city if it adheres to the promethian-based concept of limitless urban growth in the middle of a desert, with development fueled by speculation and deception, and propped-up by high technological intervention. In closing, the perils of unsustainable growth are exacerbated when that growth is based on deception.

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From William Jr. to William I, William III, "James" and Sarah. From Ahmad to his wife Fatma, and his children Eva, Luna and Salah.

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