

THE LAST OUTPOST OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

By Michael Ventura

Los Angeles Times Sunday Opinion Section – August 25, 1996

December will mark 50 years since Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel, Virginia Hill and Davie Berman opened the Flamingo, with funds supplied by mobsters Meyer Lansky and Charlie “Lucky” Luciano. Who else would have given money to gamblers crazy enough to prophesy that an isolated Mojave town (pop. 12,000) would become one of history’s legendary resorts? Yet even these high-rollers never dreamed that, a half-century later, their creation would be the fastest-growing urban center in the Western world, with its population now well over a million – and increasing by more than 4,000 every month, or almost 50,000 a year.

But something more is going on in Las Vegas, something more important than population growth and more significant than the moral issue of gambling: Las Vegas is the last great, mythic city that Western civilization will ever create.

Over the centuries, this civilization we call “Western,” with its counterpoint between diverse influences and common roots, has birthed a slow, steady, westward flow of cities whose very names have become symbolic: Baghdad, Babylon, Cairo, Athens... Constantinople, Rome, Venice, Florence... Paris, Vienna, Prague, Berlin... Moscow, St. Petersburg... London, New York, New Orleans, Los Angeles.

Say the names and you are citing not only distinctive economies and governments; each also evokes a style, a way of life, a polity of the heart and mind. Places like Paris and New York aren’t mere cities, they are three-dimensional expressions of particular ways of being human.

Such places have not accents, but different purposes for using speech; not merely a specific type of walk and attitude associated with their streets, but different ways of seeing, different ways for bodies to relate to each other in public. When we talk about a Parisian, a New Yorker, a Roman, an Angelino, an Athenian, we are invoking not only locations, but different expressions of humanity.

In this sense, Las Vegas has joined the cities of myth. People can be entertained and gamble almost anywhere – if they know where to look. But the world now journeys to Las Vegas, at the rate of many thousands a day, for something that can only be found there: the imagery, the pace, the style, the sense of license that is Las Vegas. Both intellectual foreigners and day-tripping tourists say they come to Las Vegas because they feel it is the epitome of all things American. Just as it is possible to feel that part of oneself only comes fully alive in the streets of New York, or in the sun of Los Angeles, or in the rain of Paris, many now feel that parts of themselves only wake up in the neon swirl of Vegas.

When this is a sensation experienced by millions – even vicariously, through movies and other imagery – then a city becomes part of the collective psyche that is our history. That’s what “mythic” is all about.

As Athens, Rome and New York have influenced the look of cities around the world, the neon-enhanced architecture that is the signature of Las Vegas – signs bigger than buildings, then buildings designed as signs – is now influencing skylines as different as Austin’s and Atlanta’s. This trend was identified in 1977, with Robert Venturi’s path-breaking “Learning from Las Vegas” was published by no less an authoritative institution

than MIT Press. Thus the aesthetics of gamblers entered the architectural vocabulary of the world.

It's almost as though the builders of Las Vegas have been unconsciously aware that their city would be our civilization's last great creation – for Vegas wears an architectural wardrobe of costumes taken from our entire history. At first, neon was enough – huge bright signs fronted low-slung buildings, the interiors of which were the art deco of Busby Berkeley musicals come to life. Then, in 1966, when Caesars Palace opened with its bastardized portrayal of classical Rome, the buildings not only got bigger but began to take on the trappings of all the history that had gone to create them.

Now, with the Luxor, Las Vegas has the Great Pyramid of Cairo – actually far bigger than the original. The Excalibur is a cartoon of medieval England. Paris will be the Beau Rivage. Italy is the Monte Carlo. And a casino to be completed soon, called “New York, New York,” will bring the skyline of Manhattan to the Mojave. When it's finished, you will be able, in a single glance from north to south, to see the Great Pyramid and Sphinx; turrets suggesting castles of Europe; then the classic American skyscrapers that the world now rushes to outdo – the entire arc of Western civilization on the Las Vegas Strip.

It's as though, in Las Vegas, Western history is dressing up in costume (Nevada was, after all, granted statehood on Halloween, 1864), to throw one last wild party before the next generation, or the next, stops speaking of itself as Western.

For there's no room, either in geography or history, for our civilization to create another major city.

Geographically, it's unlikely that another site as audacious as Las Vegas will attract even gangsters for investors. And historically, it can be argued that the world has become so interconnected, economically and culturally, that there is no purely “Western” civilization anymore – even if the West created another major city, it would inevitably be influenced by forces beyond the West's style or control. Major cities in Asia are already far more populous, and soon Asia will have the world's tallest buildings. Though influenced in many ways by the West, these new mega-cities are being shaped by cultures that can't be called Western by even the loosest definition. But Las Vegas was founded, and grew both in population and as a distinctive style, before the Internet became a metaphor for world culture. That will never happen again – with any city.

Cities are founded and developed in many different ways – and nobody can say quite why. Rivers and harbors are traditionally important. But Philadelphia and Boston had fine harbors, and early in our history they were the hubs of American thought and activity; yet, New York became the central city of the East Coast – as much because of its style as anything else. San Francisco and Seattle-Tacoma had big head starts over Los Angeles as West Coast ports, but the film industry and some water barons made Los Angeles the prime West Coast city and the busiest port in America. Quirks of fate and fashion, plus the leadership (and greed) of a few extraordinary people, seem finally to decide where a great city emerges and what shape it takes.

Las Vegas began as a Mormon outpost, continued as a tiny railroad stop in the middle of the desert and grew a little, though not much, as the bedroom for the men who built Hoover Dam. Then its very isolation made it attractive to some tough gamblers. Now presidential candidates, and political leaders of all stripes, kowtow to Las Vegas' leaders. Last spring, Newt Gingrich, Bob Dole and Bill Clinton, each collected hundreds of thousands of dollars in contributions for their separate promises not to allow any

brimstone-and-hellfire reformers to upset Las Vegas profits. Even dozens of atom bombs, exploded only an hour's drive from downtown Vegas, couldn't stop this place from becoming what it seems destined to be.

For better or worse, the civilization that created our way of life has had its last shot at forging its myth in Las Vegas. Whether the Vegas boom can continue is anyone's guess. But even if, in the next half century, Las Vegas becomes a ghost town, its place in history won't disappear. Las Vegas will be remembered, for as long as human beings record such things, as the last unalloyed, unfettered expression of Western civilization before the I-Net world took over.

Moralists may not like that. Historians may find it ironic. But some will say that even though the sun is setting on the day of Western dominance, its night will be lit by neon.

Copyright by Michael Ventura, all rights reserved.