ABSTRACT

Heaven or Las Vegas: 
An excursion after Hyperreality

by

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Heaven or Las Vegas seeks to question, reconsider and project the existing conditions, contemporary techniques and future constructions of the hyperreal.

The hyperreal site, initially a destination apart from the everyday life, has undergone a crucial transformation during the last 20 years. As a product of the experience economy, the techniques of the hyperreal have leaked into the everyday and the everyday life into the hyperreal, creating diffuse consumer environments where everyday human activities are enhanced and staged through specific atmospheres.

Heaven or Las Vegas takes the exhaustion of the hyperreal as a starting point and as an architectural opportunity. In search for what could be the equivalent to the destination apart in the XXI century, this thesis goes back to Las Vegas in an excursion into its past/future and projects the existing spatial, temporal and organizational devices of the hyperreal to construct a new set of architectural tools ("the continuous stage", "urban timelines" and "the hyperduck surface") that could construct a next layer for Las Vegas and a foundation for what a destination apart could be in the XXI century.
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1. Heaven or Las Vegas, an excursion after Hyperreality.

"A place where everything is better and more entertaining than in
everyday life .... The authentic fake"

Definition of the Hyperreal by Umberto Eco. (1975)

Heaven or Las Vegas Seeks to question, reconsider and project the existing
conditions, contemporary techniques and future constructions of the hyperreal.
The hyperreal site, initially a destination apart from the everyday life, has undergone
a crucial transformation during the last 20 years.

As a product of the experience economy, the spatio-temporal and narrative
techniques of the hyperreal, specially from the mid 20th century theme park, have
seeped from the walls of the destination apart into the everyday, creating diffuse
consumer environments where everyday human activities are enhanced and staged
through specific atmospheres. The hyperreal could be here and now.

This transformation can be traced in the Las Vegas strip, a laboratory of
experimentation of the Hyperreal that has evolved from a desert, to the Iconographic
in the 1960s, to the Scenographic in the 1990s, towards the now, where promises of
everyday life, urban density, sustainable mini cities in the middle of the desert, and
destinations where "a new interpretation of work and living would be redefined"
construct the contemporary notion of the hyperreal at the strip.
However, now that the techniques of the hyperreal have leaked into the everyday and the everyday life into Las Vegas, what could be the equivalent to the destination apart in the XXI century?

Heaven or Las Vegas takes the exhaustion of the hyperreal as a starting point and as an architectural opportunity. In search for answers, this thesis goes back to Las Vegas in an excursion into its future and projects the existing spatial, temporal and organizational devices to construct a new set of architectural tools ("the continuous stage", "urban timelines" and "the hyperduck surface") that would construct the next layer for Las Vegas.

Welcome to Heaven or Las Vegas, the next layer after the Hyperreal.
2. The Hyperreal. Definition.

The term hyperrealism is commonly linked as a theory in semiotics and postmodern philosophy and as an explanation of contemporary tourism.

There are several theorists on Hyperreality but some of the most influential are Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard.
For Baudrillard Hyperreality is a copy without originals. It is “the simulation of something which never really existed”. The world in which we live has been gradually replaced by a copy world where “we seek simulated stimuli and nothing more”.

The hyperreal, is defined by Umberto Eco as “the authentic fake”. A place where everything is better and more entertaining than in everyday life. A fake that improves on the original.

For both, Hyperreality has the purpose of creating a dream state in order to buy, gamble or consume and for both of them Disneyland is the ultimate expression.

Hyperreal sites are experiential scenarios where the user participates in the “make believe” process. In these sites, architecture follows the narrative of the experience, Architecture follows fiction.

Like Las Vegas or Disneyworld, these sites were not places prior to tourism; there wasn’t anything there before they existed.
2. The Hyperreal Site. General Characteristics.

Unidimensional time.

Hyperreality has a close relationship to History. It installs a unidimensional time by synchronizing different time periods, and juxtaposing cultures in a single scenario.

For Baudrillard, it marks the beginning of real, punctual and unidimensional time. It stops or erases the construction of history. No present, no past, no future.
2. The Hyperreal Site. General Characteristics.

Labyrinthine circulation.
A rigorously controlled linear circulation with no choices, but still with the objective to make you feel free. A walk through on scripted space where the audience walks into the story. The entrance and exits are often fixed, and in most cases, the perimeter isolated from the world.
2. The Hyperreal Site. General Characteristics.

Drifting (multiple perspective)
- Forced perspective.
- Trompe l'oeil.
- Panoramas.

Pausing (fixed perspective)
- Anamorphosis.
- Framed monitors, screens, dioramas.
- Framed views. (chapel effect)

Special Effects.
The use of architectural special effects with the purpose of creating an immersive dream state that leads into consumption. These are categorized in drifting or pausing, depending on the desired effects of the audience while inside the experience.
3. The Experience Economy and the transformation of the Hyperreal.

The Hyperreal site was initially an experiential scenario apart from the everyday, but in the last 20 years it has undergone a crucial transformation. In its current condition, a product of the experience economy, the spatio-temporal and narrative techniques, specially from the mid 20th century theme park, have seeped from the walls of the destination apart into the everyday, creating diffuse consumer environments where everyday human activities are enhanced and staged through specific atmospheres.
The experience economy, a term coined by Pine and Gilmore in 1999, is the economic model following the service economy from the XX century. It is based on the premise that goods and services are no longer enough and experiences must be staged where the customer is charged not only for the product and the service but for the value of the “Transformation” that an experience can offer. It is “an economy of branded emotion, where the spatio-temporal production of sites of experience correlates to brand affiliation and repeat consumerism” (Lonsway, Brian. 2009). These experiences are staged and executed according to script but they are meant to be found in the everyday.
After realizing the commercial potential of the theme park, the themed experience became the model for this new spatially driven economy. Most of the architectural techniques used come from the mid 20th century theme park, the hyperreal site par excellence, and originally conceived as a destination apart from the everyday.

With the experience economy the separation between leisure and work slowly evaporates and the leisure-work dialectic becomes a single concept; a lifestyle of the "everyday life experience". The themed environment, a title once reserved to the enclosed Disney-style theme park, becomes its general design model.
4. Tracing the evolution.

The Las Vegas strip as laboratory of experimentation of the Hyperreal.

This transformation can be traced in the Las Vegas strip, an "overpowering cultural artifact" (Koolhaas, 2004), governed by the forces of consumerism and the production of profit which makes it one of the most interesting case studies of hyperreality. It has been a long time laboratory of experimentation of the Hyperreal, where existing experiences have to be constantly renovated to the latest experiential trends.

First, there was the desert, with its scorpions, snakes and cactus. As a typical characteristic of the hyperreal site, the strip started in the middle of nowhere.
Then the iconographic or neon Las Vegas came, where the themes of the casinos made allusion to the desert and the west. In 1955, the first casinos opened on the strip. This was the car oriented strip from "learning from Las Vegas". Only seven casinos are left from this time. Up until 1962, observing the mushroom cloud from nearby tests in the Nevada desert was part of the casino attraction. Each casino operated as a destination apart, with its own theme, parking lot, and particular scenario all connected by the strip, an extension of the highway.
Then came the Scenographic, with its front yard movie sets of exploding volcanoes, golf courses, and it’s almost to scale famous monuments of the world. The new pedestrian friendly strip and its short lived family oriented perspective, attracted more tourists than ever, around 30 million annually. The implosion of neon Las Vegas became a special attraction. The strip and the casinos became a single theme park, joined by the theme of world traveling, and the strip as a connector/circulation between attractions. Cities are shrunk to the scale of a hundred acres or less and all of the casinos are part of the narrative of an epic scale resort.
And then now, where the dream of the city and promises of everyday life, urban
density, sustainable mini cities in the middle of the desert, and destinations where "a 
new interpretation of work and living would be redefined construct the contemporary 
notion of the hyper real at the strip. But, the current economic downturn has 
temporarily stopped this ongoing process and the development of the latest layer, 
the dream of the city, leaving empty buildings and construction sites in what was 
once considered a recession proof oasis.

Now that the techniques of the hyperreal have leaked into the everyday and the 
everyday life into Las Vegas, it is time to rethink what could be the layer after the 
hyperreal in the XXI century.
With their emphasis on the perpetual turnover of profit, a casino has an average life expectancy of 30 years. An urban spectacle in anticipation of the next layer and experiences to come.
5. Techniques. Before, during and after the hyperreal.

These are some of the current techniques found that construct the notion of the hyper real now in the Las Vegas Strip.
The relationship between Backstage and Stage.

In the Iconographic and Scenographic, the typical section of the hyper real delimits the separation between the exceptional (stage experience, for example the Venetian) and the everyday (backstage, the support of the hyper real). The proposed projection is the continuous stage. Where the collapse of the fixed separation between backstage and stage creates a continuous stage where new experiences, programmatic and organizational opportunities emerge. This condition produces a gradient of degrees of separation between backstage and stage that depend on needs of program and circulation.
The relationship between Image, Form and Experience.

In the Iconographic, this relationship operates with the decorated shed. Space and structure are at the service of program. Ornament is applied independently. This produces a fixed relationship between backstage and stage, with a separate sign attached to it. The mechanical, structural and environmental systems that support the experience are kept separate from the stage.

In the scenographic, the Duck. Space, structure, systems and program are distorted by a symbolic form. All the elements of the backstage and stage are deformed by the sign and still separated.
The relationship between Image, Form and Experience.

The projected, is the hyper duck surface.

Notions of narrative, service and served space collapse, and provide a move from an experience based on representation of the already known to a sensorial based immersive experience. The mechanical, structural and environmental systems of the hyperreal section combine in order to create a skin structural system that can operate as a sign, as a structure, and as poche space that could support the collapse of backstage stage, the continuous stage.
The evolution of Unidimensional Time at the strip.

Iconographic.

The condition was Fragmented narratives. The car oriented strip, was without a continuous narrative or story. Each casino use to work as its own plot or narrative. Its own moment in time.
The evolution of Unidimensional Time at the strip.

Scenographic.
In the Scenographic there is a continuous narrative. The grand tour. It marks the installment of the typical unidimensional time of the mid 20th century theme park at the strip. The panorama view and the strip becomes a continuous linear sequence or grand tour, creating the typical one dimensional time of the hyperreal.
The evolution of Unidimensional Time at the strip.

Urban Timelines.
The proposed is the creation of Urban Timelines. The diorama and the narrative based organization experience would work together to deconstruct and reframe the existing unidimensional time on the strip, creating a fragmented grand tour of spontaneous dioramas of a particular moment at a time.
The evolution of Unidimensional Time at the strip.

From withering Layers to Urban Timelines.
As opposed to the unidimensional time, and history layering, moments of the past, present, and future of Las Vegas intertwine with the grand tour. The experience is organized as a way of time travelling through the history of Las Vegas. It's not anymore the withering layers. It is a program generator and organization tool.
5. Techniques. Before, during and after the hyperreal.

These are the three tools proposed. The continuous stage which operates as an organizational tool at building scale, the hyperduck surface which operates at an interior scale, as a shift from wall to surface, where notions of systems, narrative and service and served space collapse and at last urban timelines, a narrative based organizational tool that operates at urban scale.

One of the main characteristic of the hyperreal is the narrative that acts as framework of the design project. In this thesis a narrative was created to work as framework and design tool. This narrative can be read as the narrative of the experience, while at the same time it is loosely based on information, predictions and facts found about Las Vegas.

"In the year 2012, Las Vegas Boulevard, had 8 completely abandoned projects summing more than 15 billion dollars and an oversupply of hotel rooms. If tourism kept growing at a constant rate the strip would need around 10 years to be fully occupied."

At a residential scale, the same was happening; it went from being the fastest growing metropolis in America, to the one with most vacant residential communities.

Scientists predict that by 2031, 60% of the water coming into the city will stop. The social implications could result in a water war between the city residents and the casino owners, making the strip no longer a safe, fun, place to navigate through Las Vegas.

As preparation for the future, and as a result of having to reassess the service and served conditions at an urban scale, the corporation, the current owner of 55% of the strip, is the only one that is looking into opening a new destination since 2009.

Developers, architects, interior designers, film makers, tourism specialists and the corporation marketing department, are working together trying to create a new experience for Las Vegas.

The destination would act as an alternate strip, something in between a theme park, amusement park, and living museum about the past, present and future of Las Vegas that would connect its properties and would provide the next experiential layer for the city.

Architects were advised to specifically address some of the current notions of the architecture of Las Vegas in order to adapt them for future conditions and this new experience. The relationship between inside and outside, the relationship between backstage and stage, and the current narrative based organization of the strip, had to be reconsidered because of the effects of an imminent environmental disaster, and the expected conditions and lack of security of the strip and the city in the near future.

Eventually, because of the collapse of service and served at an urban scale, employees of the corporation owned attractions started moving into the structure.

Welcome to Heaven or Las Vegas, the ultimate layer after the Hyperreal. “
7. Presentation Boards.

The boards are divided in four. First thesis methodology and then three scales, three techniques. The hyper duck surface, the continuous stage and urban timelines.

The Thesis methodology board contains the diagrams that were explained during the tools and techniques section of the book.

The hyperduck board shows how the move from wall to surface, from representation to a sensorial experience happens. The hyperduck surface accommodates all the needs of the experience, and at the same time, works as structure and as a sign of the narrative; the past, present and future of Las Vegas. The movement of the surface produces openings, circulation pathways (continuous stage) and sometimes inverts the exterior and interior conditions (see interior connections diagrams).

The continuous stage, building scale. Shows the organization of the program inside the experience. It is divided in section between the continuous stage, which is the new strip, and the stages. The movement of these stages is what creates the new strip, the residual of the figure ground section, and they act as circulation connecting the different levels. (see long. section)

Urban timelines board. The site plan is organized by three factors. Living related program is based on the needs of employees per casino, stage program, is based on time traveling, organized according to the coexisting layers on the site. And the continuous stage, which is based on corporate owned casino connectivity.
Hyperduck Surface Board
The Continuous Stage Board
The continuous stage, section.
The experience is divided in section between the continuous stages, which is the new strip, and the stages.
The site plan is organized by three factors. Living related program, based on the needs of employees per casino, stage program, based on the co-existing layers on the site, and the continuous stage, which is based on corporate owned casino connectivity.
The continuous stage view.
Final Presentation.
Bibliography.


Image Bibliography.

- The hyperreal. Definition. Pg 3. 

- Special Effects. Pg 7. 

- The experience Economy and the transformation of the Hyperreal. Pg 8. 
  http://www.jerde.com/media/images/experiential/06ropp_expfull_hillsideaerial.jpg

- Tracing the evolution. Pg 11. 

- Techniques. Pg 16, 18, 24. 
  Decorated shed. 
  Duck. 
  http://api.ning.com/files/muHzMm519fcbOFwGu3ns*unX6nE*0hrkq3yjt8Hw2dIkmN 
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- Framework. Narrative as a design tool. Pg. 25 
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- Final presentation. Pg. 40 
  Photos by John McWilliams.