

THE EVOLUTION OF LAS VEGAS ARCHITECTURE

by Alex Cilento

The travel industry has always been important to Las Vegas. The City's location is due to the natural springs of the Las Vegas Valley and it's position along the route from Salt Lake City to Southern California. The town's history is the history of the gambling industry in which Vegas becomes a destination and not a rest stop. Much has been written about the history of Las Vegas. Mostly the focus is the unique cast of characters who ran the casinos and the evolution of the industry from miners playing faro in sawdust bars to today's palaces of slot machines for retiree's. This article chronicles the evolution of Las Vegas architecture. The City's pioneering roles in both the gambling industry and casino architecture are deeply intertwined. The inspiration for this article is a wonderful book by Alan Hess: "Viva Las Vegas: after hours architecture."

A Railroad Town - 1905 - 1930

In 1905 Montana Senator William Clark completed the San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad. The Las Vegas Valley was the obvious choice for a townsite because it was approximately midway and had plenty of groundwater to support the railroad as well as a town. Las Vegas was laid out as a typical railroad town. The train station formed the base of the town with the main road at right angles to the tracks. Today the station would be in the back of the Plaza Hotel and Fremont Street remains the heart of downtown. The early Vegas economy was driven by a

railroad repair facility and as a supply station for the mines to the northwest. For much of this period the Mission Revival railroad station was the grandest building in town. Fremont Street was an undistinguished collection of single story wooden structures. In the late 1920's a road is punched through from Baker to Vegas and the automobile began to replace the train as the dominant means of travel to Las Vegas.

Legalized Gambling - 1931 - 1945

The construction of Hoover Dam in the early 1930's brought Las Vegas a measure of prosperity through the depression. Dam workers and dam tourists provided the customers for the small clubs that lined Fremont Street after gambling legalization in 1931. The single story wooden structures on Fremont Street were replaced with two and three story brick buildings. Neon was first used in signs in the early 1930's. By the end of the decade neon had become a major architectural feature of Fremont

Street and Vegas began its long romance with over-the-top glitz. Special mention needs to be given to "The Meadows Club". Built in 1931 by underworld figure, Tony Cornero, it featured an elegant nightclub/casino and hotel. Long gone, the Meadows Club was at the current intersection of Fremont and Charleston. A mob run, upscale joint that preceded the Flamingo by fifteen years!

This era was complete with the construction of the El Rancho Vegas (1941) and the Last Frontier (1942.) While downtown was centered on the pedestrian, these hotels were focused on car travel, primarily from LA. The highway into town provided lots of inexpensive land and both these hotels were comprised of spread out single story buildings and bungalows. Architecturally they had their roots in the motor courts that were spreading all over the country. Both had a casual "dude ranch" theme. To attract passing motorists the El Rancho had a short tower with a windmill while the Last Frontier put its pool next to the



The Meadows Club (1931)

highway as an incentive to stop. The Last Frontier is at the location of the current New Frontier.

Sophistication 1945 - 1957

For many Las Vegas history fans, this was the golden era. It begins with Bugsy Siegel and the Flamingo. Before the war, the Sunset Strip outside of LA was notorious for wide open gambling in swank surroundings for the Hollywood crowd. LA got a reform mayor and Vegas got a bunch of mobsters anxious to show how exciting their gambling industry could be when practiced out in the open. Like the El Rancho and the Last Frontier, the Flamingo was a glorified motel. But the Flamingo was no dude ranch. Mr. Siegel wanted a building where LA high rollers would feel at home. The result was a spacious, elegantly appointed building that used the clean lines, materials and angles that were becoming popular in the upscale homes and clubs of the Hollywood elite. Actually, the Flamingo was conceived by Billy Wilkerson, who owned several upscale nightspots on the Sunset Strip. But this article is about architecture and not history. While the



The Sands (1952)

Flamingo was conceptually similar to the motel-inspired layouts of the El Rancho and Last Frontier, its contemporary/urban style and use of exotic landscaping began the trend of creating "other worlds" in the desert. Unfortunately Mr. Siegel was to die of unnatural causes before his Flamingo became wildly profitable. The mob was ecstatic with their new

(almost) legitimate industry and the next decade brought to Vegas the Desert Inn, Sahara, Sands, Riviera, and Dunes. Each of these casino/hotels followed the lead of the Flamingo with an emphasis on sophisticated contemporary designs. The Sands broke new ground with the incorporation of the marquee as an integral part of the architecture.



The Flamingo (1947)



The Flamingo (1953 remodel)

The older hotels were forced to keep up. The El Rancho's Round-Up Room became the Opera House, the Last Frontier became the modern New Frontier and, in 1953, the Flamingo underwent a major remodel including the "champagne tower". The Riviera became Las Vegas' first high rise in 1955. At nine stories, many doubted the ability of desert soil to support the structure. The Riviera's design was taken from the clean, almost art-deco theme prevalent in Miami buildings. The original building is still in use today among all the high rise expansion towers. Almost no other structures from this era remain (OK, the low-rise rooms of the Royal Nevada, now part of the Stardust.)

Downtown the neon explosion continued with the addition of Vegas Vic at the Pioneer and the grand marquee of the Golden Nugget. Combining sign and architecture was never better done than The Mint in 1957.

Gambling Goes Mainstream 1958 - 1965

Remember Tony Cornero, builder of the prescient Meadows Club? Well the Meadows "burnt down" and "Admiral" Cornero then ran a fleet of gambling ships off the California coast until 1939 when his fleet was



The Mint (1957)

attacked by the US Coast Guard. In 1944 he opened the SS Rex in the Apache Hotel on Fremont Street but that lasted only six months because of licensing problems. He went back to his offshore gambling boat business, this time further out from California's jurisdiction but was put out of business in 1948 by a new Federal law prohibiting gambling in US coastal waters. Besides being one hell of an interesting guy, Tony was a pioneer in realizing the potential of the low stakes gambler. His off-shore gambling ships were targeted at middle class folks looking for fun. Cornero's ultimate creation was the Stardust Hotel which opened in 1958.

Tony did not make the opening as he had a fatal heart attack at the dice tables of the Desert Inn in 1955. Architecturally, the Stardust was a gambling warehouse and began Vegas' love affair with the low roller. It was also Vegas' first 1000 room hotel. The hotel part consisted of long rows of barrack-like buildings behind the casino. The casino was an ordinary building with its entire facade covered with an extraordinary 216-foot long neon sign. While the Stardust was the last major strip hotel to be built until the mid-1960's, it began a wave of expansion for the existing hotels. Operators began to realize that the gambling business was a numbers game: so many rooms produced so much profit. Several casinos including the Sahara, the Riviera, and the Desert Inn all added nondescript towers to their casinos to increase business. Innovative architecture and design sophistication were of little use when the core strategy is lots of low stake gamblers lured in by ultra low room rates.



The Stardust (1958)

The Strip was becoming a crowded mixture of neon and building towers. To attract passing motorists in the

1960's several hotel built magnificent freestanding signs. The Stardust and Frontier signs are still in use but the Sahara sign is gone. The best was The Dunes.

Special mention has to go to the Landmark. Built in 1964, it finally opened as a casino in 1969. Someone obviously watched the Jetsons too often. The wild architecture of LA car washes and diners didn't translate well into hotel/casinos and represented an architectural dead-end.

Downtown continued to get brighter. Fremont Street was a nearly unbroken facade of neon.

We're Not in Kansas Anymore! 1966 – 1980

Jay Sarno built Caesars Palace which opened in 1966. Sarno was quite a guy. He was heavily mob-connected, loved large quantities of food and women and was a compulsive gambler who usually lost. Here's a guy who owns a casino yet he keeps losing a good part of his net worth at the craps table. Also, he was a devoted family man and another Las Vegas visionary. Sarno had experimented with soft rounded architectural shapes and elaborate driveway landscaping in his nationwide Cabana motel chain and Caesars was to be the flagship. Caesars was the first major hotel built in Las Vegas in eight years. Hotels like the Dunes or the Sahara might have a desert design theme but Caesars was another world. Turning off the Strip, you followed a long driveway of fountains and statuary into imperial Rome. The concept continued with the interior architecture, furnishings and employee costumes. Las Vegas was in the desert but reality was not as profitable as putting visitors in an exotic fantasy world where you could be less



The Dunes (1980)



The Landmark (1969)

inhibited. This has been a strong architectural trend that guides Vegas to the present.

Another milestone was Circus Circus which opened in 1968. While not exactly the highest level of architectural sophistication, it began the effort to attract the family tourist dollar. Interestingly, the ultra-low-roller Circus Circus was conceived and built by Jay Sarno.

This is the era of Howard Hughes. Hughes bought six hotels but never built one. His most lasting legacy was that he brought a sense of legitimacy to gambling as a business and began the current period of corporate ownership. However it was another individual, Kirk Kerkorian, who built the International Hotel in 1969. Its design included a central core with three tower wings and no main facade to face the highway. This design has been repeated in many Vegas hotels including the Mirage, Treasure Island, Monte Carlo, Mandalay Bay and Venetian. Interestingly, the Paris has four wings. The International had 1500 rooms and was then the worlds largest hotel. Each wing has been expanded and is now the Las Vegas Hilton. Kerkorian's next hotel, the MGM Grand (now Bally's), was almost a standard urban high rise office building with a little extra glitz.

Existing hotels continued to expand, mostly with towers that displayed the tasteful, efficient facades that public corporations wished to present to the public. No longer would casinos experiment with architectural expressions like the "Diamond of the Dunes" tower or the Sands classic round tower. The same was happening downtown with the Mint tower and the Fremont hotel.



Caesars Palace (Late 1970's)



Circus Circus (1970's)

Corporate Las Vegas 1981 – present

The architecture of the present era is dominated by two forces. The first is corporate ownership. Decisions are not made by individual entrepreneurs but by committee after extensive market research. The second is that Strip real estate has become so valuable that the car no longer has a dominant role on the strip. Your car is quickly

sent to a multistory parking structure in the back of the hotel and out of sight. The Mirage began the current wave of the modern mega-casino in 1989. Today, architecture is probably the main method of providing a hotel with its identity. The Luxor pyramid, the Stratosphere tower, and the Eiffel tower are among the most obvious examples. New York New York is an almost unbelievable fusion of sign and building. The Excalibur is

probably the lamest attempt at triumphant architecture.

Downtown blocked all traffic and put a two million light canopy over Fremont Street.

That takes us to today's Las Vegas Strip; an instantly recognizable world icon. New hotels are careful blends of over-the-top architectural presentation and cost control targeted at

specific psychographic and demographic market segments. There's an unmistakable Disneyland culture at work. One interesting aspect has been Steve Wynn, His Mirage, Treasure Island, and Bellagio have all featured grand scale attractions designed for the pedestrian. His track record may suggest that the future strip does away with the car entirely.

The evolution of Vegas architecture is an interesting story. It is natural that Vegas change. Gaming (not gambling) is a business and evolves to follow the money. Walmart does not look like a Woolworth's five and dime. All in all, I wish we still had the Dunes sign, the Landmark, the Sands.....

Books & Videotapes

for the Club Library

by Robert Pardue

CC>CC Library Videotapes

Thanks to Michael Ludwig for continuing to compile new videotapes of gaming-related programs. These videos, along with others in our library, are available to club members. The videos - #11 through #13 - contain the following programs.

Video #11

- "Beyond Closed Doors with Joan Lunden" - The Aladdin Implosion & Cirque du Soleils in LV (2000) - A&E - :30
- "Haunted History: Haunted Nevada" (2000) - *The History Channel* - 1:00
- "Extreme Homes" featuring Dale Seymour's home (2000) - *HGTV* - :30
- "E! True Hollywood Story" featuring Wayne Newton (2000) - *E!* - 2:00
- "E! True Hollywood Story" featuring Frank Sinatra (1998) - *E!* - 2:00

Video #12

- "E! True Hollywood Story" featuring Liberace (1998) - *E!* - 1:00
- "E! True Hollywood Story" featuring Dean Martin (1998) - *E!* - 2:00
- "Best Of" - "Las Vegas" (2000) - *The Food Channel* - :30
- "E! True Hollywood Story" featuring Donald Trump (2000) - *E!* - 1:00
- "FBI: The Untold Story" - Harvey's Casino bomb extortion case (1999) - *The History Channel* - :30

Video #13

- "Vegas Nights" (2000) - *The Discovery Channel* - 1:00
- "Biography" featuring Wayne Newton (1997) - A&E - 1:00
- "Casino Diaries" - #1 "Cat & Mouse" *The Discovery Channel* (2000) :30
- "Casino Diaries" - #2 "Executive Host" - *The Discovery Channel* (2000) :30

- "Travelers" - "Las Vegas" - *The Travel Channel* (1999) - 1:00
- "World's Best Places To Strike It Rich" - *The Travel Channel* (2000) - 1:00
- "Las Vegas: Get Lucky" - *The Travel Channel* (2000) - 1:00

For complete contents of the library, see the updated list posted on the club website, or request a copy by mail. If you have a donation to offer, or have questions about the library, please see me at the convention or write to me at:

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