

Architecture: Signs and Symbols from the Ephemeral Present

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Conceptually innovative architectural form inevitably references emerging technologies, extant societal priorities, and movements in art. A formally lesser considered force, however, often driving contemporary conceptualization is increasingly transcending the boundaries of these realms while advancing the art of building and redefining the dynamics of architectural expressions that are fundamental to human situations at the core of the discipline of architecture. This force, to appropriately coin a descriptor of *ephemerality*, emerges from an insatiable global market demand for the ephemeral. Its magnitude is evidenced by built conceptualizations that are intended for entertainment but through their residual benefits become permanent components of their proximal urban fabrics, i.e., world fairs, international expositions, themed amusement parks, and destination gaming resorts. Perhaps the most prominent impact of *ephemerality* on today's human situations is exerted by the investment strategy based design approaches inherent in the property development processes of the entertainment environments of Las Vegas, Nevada and the Disney Company. Its observable social impact is underscored by a pervasive blurred distinction between daily life patterns in entertainment environments that function as cities, and cities that function as entertainment environments. While throughout history ephemeral entertainment environments were systematically located beyond the perimeter of the physical urban fabric, by the mid-20th century they were becoming symbiotic parts of cities, and in some cases they redefined architecture that was intrinsic to the social fabric and cultural identity of the city. An analytical inquiry into the evolution of *ephemerality* provides a philosophical framework for the understanding of its present day and future role in design, architecture, and planning.

It is axiomatic that recreation, relaxation, and the pursuits of pleasurable activities are integral to human psychological and biological well-being. Historical accounts abound of events designed to provide opportunities for the fulfillment of these basic human needs. Ancient Minoans, for example, staged bull fights as far back as 3,000 B.C. By 1,500 B.C. the ancient Greeks were renowned for their athletic, musical and theatrical performances. The Romans, although continuing the Greek traditions of entertainment, added various barbarous events to their repertoire of amusements. During the Middle Ages various games of chance, such as dice, were introduced. An unquenchable public thirst for spectacle paved the way for circus type acts by 1,700.¹ Technological advances in the 20th century afforded not only more time for a plethora of entertainment, but also the means to architecturally facilitate and celebrate the activities associated with it.

The dialectical relationships that entertainment environments have always maintained to their urban contexts with their transportation networks became more pronounced than ever before. As the relationship between these previously distinct entities have become more complex, so have spatial relationships, which after the mid 20th century became more interdependent. In some instances the residual economic benefits of gaming and amusement provided strong incentives for public officials to be supportive of the favorable positioning of such environments within or near urban contexts. But the physical forms of today's entertainment environments are no longer exclusively about the facilitating of gaming and amusement. Rather they are more about creating a narrative experience that in a chain of social events becomes an engine for suburban and urban development.² This is evidenced by the expansion of the entertainment environment model

beyond its boundaries, and its consequent imposition upon cities due to a market demand by growing segments of populations to live and work within the boundaries of entertainment environments.³

As early as the turn of the 20th century, the *ephemerality* of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago noticeably inspired concepts of American community. While the fair's classic Beaux Arts eclecticism was initially perceived by high profile architects as cultural bankruptcy, to the 27 million visitors, who constituted approximately one third of the nation's population, it came to represent a vision of the future metropolis. In their enthusiasm for Beaux Arts design, fair visitors completely overlooked the genuinely innovative buildings of Chicago, such as the metal framed buildings. The residual benefits of the fair shortly followed in the form of new concepts that were clearly influenced by the fair's design and were proposed for Chicago and other cities by the fair's chief consulting architect Daniel Hudson Burnham. Other architects and planners followed a trend set by Burnham and their collective efforts eventually coalesced into the City Beautiful Movement.⁴ Their design vocabularies incorporated many thematic features from the great European cities with majestic civic buildings and lush landscaped boulevards. The Exposition did much to advance the creative applications of ornate Beaux Arts style not only with reference to civic buildings but also residential designs.⁵ Henry Hobson Richardson, the American architect who was also educated at the Ecole des Beaux Arts was one of the major exponents of the style for several years following the Fair. Several of his residential projects, such as the Watts Sherman House, clearly exemplified and articulated the influence of a trend that was set by the Fair.⁶

In addition to expositions and fairs, resort and gaming environments were also beginning to have a noticeable impact on architectural expressions at the turn of the last century. The newly constructed summer resorts in Newport, Rhode Island during the late 1800's, for example, conveyed a new architectural style evocative of a distinctive sense of place. Although rooted in the Shingle Style influenced by Queen Anne, the not entirely original architectural compositions harnessed some innovative design principles. As the rapidly expanding resort district took on the character of a suburban village with a densely developed residential area, the Newport Casino designed by McKim, Mead and White Architects opened in 1881 and became a destination for lively summertime frolics. More importantly, it was a landmark structure whose design served as a springboard for a series of remarkable commercial and residential projects, among others, the Colman

House, and perhaps the most innovative of its time, the Robert Goelet House.⁷

The development of the Lower Miami area, a regional Art Deco interpretation and lyrical expression of tropical resort luxury, was realized in the late 1930's. It was conceived in response to a market demand primarily driven by middle class Florida vacationers.⁸ Set against the cerulean Florida skies, the pastel stuccoed, small, intimate hotels and the epicurean restaurants with their terraces were mingled with private residences to harmoniously adorn the western side of Ocean Drive. The designers who conceived this vacationers' paradise understood the anticipations of the sun seeking visitors who wanted anything but reminders of home. They provided for narrative experiences via architectural illusions of joy and escape that turned travel memories into delightful fictions coloring the visitors' recollections of their stay. The hotels, for example, were designed somewhat like ephemeral stage sets resonant with layers of ambiguous meanings where the guests could act out their fantasies of being rich and famous for a moment, or for an evening. Characteristically, rather than being architecturally imposing, the structures frivolously imitated ocean liners with bold horizontal stripes, ocular windows, circular glittery bosses, and pipe railings to create a Nautical Moderne aura within and about them. Renaissance-like reliefs, cameros, angels' wings, flamingos, and Mayan reliefs, to mention only a few of the many other details, also added to the kaleidoscope of the ambiance that enchanted the visitors. Often implying some historical reference, real or fabricated, they relied on the unorthodox application of classical elements to create moods of an extravagant resort that metamorphosed even ordinary weekend visitors into ones living lives of fantastic luxury. Restaurants especially excelled in conveying a degage disregard for conventional concepts of hospitality designs. The "Carioca," for example, mimicked and condensed the night life of Rio de Janeiro and complemented it with its designs that extended into the metaphors they were. The "French Casino," whose original elegance endures to this day, continues to indulge its clientele's sense of romance much like European clubs of the 1930s. Although Art Deco was enthusiastically received by the public seeking that extra dimension of sensory excitement, in intellectual quarters it was fundamentally regarded as a marketable form of "low-art." Critics typically described it as a misguided trend in aesthetic illiteracy, leading the design practitioners to compromise the integrity of their work. Paradoxically, the *ephemerality* that provided some psychological escape had much influence on commercial and housing design not only in the Miami area but in other urban and suburban contexts as well.

The 1960's marked the beginnings of an era with the proposed Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow in the Disney Company's EPCOT in which the profitable fusion of entertainment and non-entertainment environments became clearly apparent. Although the proposed concept included a residential area for 70,000 persons that was connected to an urban center, it was never implemented as a habitat. The transformed concept re-emerged, however, and was implemented as the town of Celebration, Florida that may be characterized as a themed environment with most of the predictable mechanisms of theme parks.

Celebration, perhaps appropriately referred to by its critics as "Archetainment" in Orlando, Florida, is "a 19th century town for the 20th century, harking back to a time when lemonade stands, not crime, was on every corner."⁹ It also underscores the fact that synthetic experiences controlled through design can induce memories that most residents never experienced, but desperately desire and that satisfaction of such desires can be achieved by the commoditization of nostalgia. Toward this end a "Pattern Book of Architectural Styles" was provided to guide both home buyers and builders in the process of creating a personalized narrative experience from a recovered real or imagined past. The styles included Victorian, Classical, Colonial Revival, Coastal, French, and Mediterranean. While any of these styles may be initially combined, no subsequent modifications are permitted to "customize" the appearance of a built product. Simply put, one can purchase a sense-of-place that will appeal to the deep cycles of the human psyche where meanings about family and community govern the emotions. The architectural design details symbolically reinforce these meanings by their associations with times imagined to be simpler than those of today. A Disney Company experiment in social engineering on a community level, it is a small town on 4,900 acres near Walt Disney World that is likely to have influence on community planning practices well beyond its physical boundaries. Although its plan and design are rooted in Walt Disney's nostalgic recreation of childhood experiences and fashioned into a town in which there is economic and community stability and no crime, pollution or observable deviant social behavior, it is profoundly resonant of the core philosophies of New Urbanism.

The global impact of the Disney Company's planning and design principles underlying Main Street USA, a theme park feature that has not changed since the opening in 1955 and the town of Celebration, Florida can be observed in various urban contexts.¹⁰ According to research findings, the appeal of Main Street USA extends far beyond the realm of the Disney Company's

theme parks. Completed town renewal and (re)development projects that also involved the reconstruction of main streets strongly resemble those of 19th century America as interpreted in Disney's theme parks. This may well be because financial activity is crucial to the survival of any town's main street. Underlying this reality is the need to create a narrative experience that evolves from the replacement or fusion of authenticity with selective fantasy.¹¹ Another example is Huis Ten Bosch, a Japanese theme park town that opened in 1992. It is an environment of displaced nostalgia created by the derivative stylization of 12-14th century Holland and the vernacular of Dutch city-making. Much like Celebration, Florida it is a totally controlled simulation and commoditization of meanings embedded in entertainment concepts complete with the organization and execution of pseudo-events.

While the driving force behind the Disney Company's Main Street USA and the town of Celebration is nostalgia created by the selective manipulation of historical form, *tour de force* behind Las Vegas, Nevada gaming and resort district (a Disneyland for adults) is undisputable financial profit generated by the strategic utilization of architectural stage sets comprised of displaced familiar forms. Thus, they are not about architecture. Rather they are functions of an entertainment medium that is about sensuality, promises of personal freedoms and wealth, and adult sexuality.¹² Each mega-resort differentiates itself by the thematic orchestration of these forms in an intensely competitive economic environment. The complex process of creating a narrative experience "starts with a vision, a concept and a great story [when] turning fiction into fact. [to]...script the experience, literally and figuratively, and then integrate the storyline into every step of the process, every facet of the program, every detail of the design."¹³ The producers of "Las Vegas," a documentary about America's neon oasis, described this environment as a "city that is larger than life. A city without limits. A glittering mecca of excess and desires."¹⁴ If the constant pilgrimage of visitors to this mecca that exceeded 35 million persons in 2002 is an indication that it may well be a collective concretization of human consciousness in the physical, then it may be argued that it is a depiction of the state of the psyche of large segments of the world's population facilitated through the creators of this entertainment environment as catalysts.¹⁵ Jung's work supports this assumption when advancing that in the process of individuation the psyche becomes 'whole' when a balance is achieved between four functions; thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuiting."¹⁶ Both Hess and Friedman elaborate on the empirical counterparts of this process, specifically with reference to observable patterns of behavioral re-

sponses exhibited by visitors to the section of the city that is increasingly being regarded an icon of American urban culture.^{17,18} Their research based observations are reflective of the layering system and its attendant characteristics described by Jung.

In recent years several mega-resorts were constructed in Las Vegas, each testifying to the successful achievement of rather ambitious intentions to transform visitors' fantasies into reality. One of these, the Mirage Resorts, Inc., Bellagio's *ephemerality* not only continues to attract the largest spectator crowds in search of fantasy, but it also exerts much influence on both commercial and residential property development. The resort's narrative experience is predicated on the quaint village of Bellagio above Lake Como in northern Italy. It is punctuated with a regularly scheduled water ballet of 160 feet high stream shooting fountains choreographed with music and lights on an eleven-acre artificial lake. Although the thirty-six-story high 3,000 room hotel facility dominates this contrived landscape, the intimate individuation of the personal narrative experience is skillfully focused toward the lower level building forms mimicking Italian villas with Mediterranean colors and red tile roofs. The property's "artificial nostalgia for a prosperous past and glamorous foreign resorts is characteristic of appeals to the newly rich in the 1990's."¹⁹

An expansion of the Bellagio's entertainment environment model beyond its boundaries is taking shape currently in the inhospitable Mojave Desert in the form of the Lake Las Vegas Resort, located seventeen miles from the gaming and resort district of Las Vegas. Much like mega-resorts, it is a miniature self-contained city and an engineering and ecological marvel with Mediterranean styling of custom housing products. The products are themed differently in various villages with names, such as Monaco, Siena, and Marseilles. Contributing to an overall thematic image, the Village of Monte Lago features an evocation of the Ponte Vecchio. The images appropriated in this narrative of the nostalgic promises of Venice and Florence, Italy include gondolas, mountain streams, lush golf courses, horse trails, performances of Vivaldi, and most importantly, a sense of destiny for mature baby boomers.

It stands to reason that the same market demand that drives the development of entertainment environments, similarly also drives the expansion of the amusement and entertainment theming model beyond its mere applications in the gaming and resort contexts. This is most pronounced in the development of residential and retail projects, both of which are powerful forces in modern image conscious societies that are fueled by consumption. The impact of this expansion of

fantasy transfer on human situations is increasingly manifest, simply because in contemporary societies meanings are derived from mass media and consumer themes rather than authentic histories and traditions.

The research findings of Leyton provide substance for the study and understanding of the dynamics of narrative experience and its role in *ephemerality* that is dependent on perceived relationships between environmental form and time. He compellingly argues that environmental form is used by the mind to recover the past and as such, it forms the basis for memory. He further argues that psychological connections made by the mind between environmental form and time recover the past from such forms and become the basis for memory as the mind assigns experiential values to them.²⁰ The meanings of these superficially acquired values become of considerable importance in subsequently expressed preferences for built environmental form.²¹ Pursuant to Leyton's proposition that perception is a recovery of causal history, it stands to reason that the process of the selective manipulation of displaced historical form when designing entertainment environments is intended to also manipulate and appeal to human emotions. The fact that well directed strong emotions are elicited by entertainment environments is indisputable. The nature of their occurrences bear similarities to those in psychological therapy where repressions and inhibitions are weakened.²² The power of the appeal of designed form in such circumstances can be observed in ways in which a range of induced emotional responses to environmental form engage thought processes that underlie actions directed toward the fulfillment of desires for the narrative experience in non-entertainment environments. This transference as a generalized response is a common occurrence in contemporary image directed societies that are becoming increasingly rich in opportunities to satisfy desires for the narrative experience that often originate in the *ephemerality* of entertainment environments.

Critical opinions suggest that these mutant environments behave as laboratories in which architecture is reduced to sign and decorum, thus at best, they may be regarded as experiments. They also suggest that because of maintained total control over these environments an atmosphere of social segregation prevails and some forms of repression are inherent due to a lack of any user initiated diversity. Still, a paradox is that the narrative that is being offered by superficial iconic eclecticism that is being dismissed by its critics is a strong critique of and perhaps an antidote to today's metropolises burdened with social unrest, unpredictable social patterns, economic uncertainties, and political tensions.

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NOTES

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