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House of Cards

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Las Vegas: Too many people in the wrong place, celebrating waste as a way of life.

It was advertised as the biggest non-nuclear explosion in Nevada history. On October 27, 1993, Steve Wynn, the state's official "god of hospitality," flashed his trademark smile and pushed the detonator button. As 200,000 Las Vegans cheered, the 18-story Dunes sign, once the tallest neon structure in the world, crumbled to the desert floor. The dust cloud was visible from the California border.

No one thought it the least bit strange that Wynn's gift to the city he so adores was to blow up an important piece of its past. This was simply urban renewal Vegas-style: one costly facade destroyed to make way for another. Wynn, the proprietor of the Mirage and Treasure Island, had promised a new super-resort on the Dunes site with lakes large enough for jet-skiing. He did not bother to explain where the water would come from.

By obscure coincidence, the demolition of the Dunes followed close on the centenary of Frederick Jackson Turner's legendary "end of the frontier" address to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where he meditated on the fate of the American character in a conquered and rapidly urbanizing West. Turner questioned the survival of frontier democracy in the coming age of giant cities and monopoly capital, and wondered what the West would be like a century hence.

Steve Wynn has the depressing answer: Las Vegas is the terminus of western history, the end of the trail. At the edge of the millennium, this strange amalgam of boomtown, world's fair, and highway robbery is the fastest growing metropolitan area in the United States. While Southern California suffers through its worst recession since the 1930s, Las Vegas has been generating tens of thousands of new jobs in gaming, construction, and related services. As a consequence, nearly a thousand new residents-half of them Californians-arrive each week.

Some of the immigrants are downwardly mobile blue-collar families desperately seeking a new start in the Vegas boom. Others are affluent retirees headed straight for a gated suburb in what they imagine is a golden sanctuary from the urban turmoil of Los Angeles. Increasing numbers are young Latinos, the new bone and sinew of the casino-and-hotel economy. This spring Clark

County's population passed the million mark, and demographers predict it will grow by another million over the next generation.

The explosive growth of southern Nevada can only accelerate the environmental deterioration of the American Southwest. Las Vegas long ago outstripped its own natural-resource infrastructure. Steve Wynn's hydro-fetishism (he once proposed turning downtown's Fremont Street into a pseudo-Venetian Grand Canal) sets the standard for Las Vegas' prodigal overconsumption of water: 360 gallons daily per capita versus 211 in Los Angeles, 160 in Tucson, or 110 in Oakland. In a desert basin that receives only four inches of annual rainfall, irrigation of lawns and golf courses, not to mention artificial lakes and lagoons, adds the equivalent of another 20 to 30 inches per acre.

Yet southern Nevada has little water capital to squander. As Johnnie-come-lately to the Colorado Basin wars, it has to sip Lake Mead through the smallest straw. At the same time, reckless groundwater overdrafts in Las Vegas Valley are producing widespread and costly subsidence of the city's foundations. Natural conditions dictate a fastidiously conservative water ethic. Tucson, after all, has prospered on a reduced water ration; its residents actually seem to like having cactus instead of crabgrass in their front yards.

But Las Vegas disdains to live within its means. Instead, it is aggressively turning its profligacy into a kind of environmental terrorism against its neighbors. "Give us your water, or we will die," demand Clark County water officials of politicians grown fat on campaign contributions from the gaming industry. What Las Vegas cannot buy from Arizona farmers, it seems determined to divert from the Virgin River (a tributary of the Colorado) or steal from the ranchers in Nye and Lincoln counties. Over the next decade, it may desiccate central Nevada and southwestern Utah as thoroughly as Los Angeles did the once-lush Owens Valley on the eastern flank of the Sierra, when it stole its water 80 years ago (an act of environmental piracy immortalized in the film Chinatown).

Southern Nevada is as thirsty for fossil fuels as it is for water. As Clark County's transportation director recently testified, the county has the "lowest vehicle occupancy rate in the country" in tandem with the "longest per person, per trip, per day ratio." Consequently, the number of days with unhealthy air quality is dramatically increasing. Like Phoenix and Los Angeles before it, Las Vegas was once a mecca for those seeking the curative powers of desert air. Now, according to EPA reports, Las Vegas ties New York City for fifth place in carbon monoxide pollution. Its smog already contributes to the ochre shroud over the Grand Canyon, and is beginning to reduce visibility in California's new East Mojave National Recreation Area as well.

Las Vegas, moreover, is a base camp for the panzer divisions of motorized toys-dune buggies, dirt bikes, speed boats, jet-skis, etc.-that each weekend make war on the fragile desert environment. Few western landscapes, for instance, are more degraded than the lower Colorado River Valley, which is under relentless, three-pronged attack by the leisure classes of southern Nevada, Phoenix, and Southern California. In the blast-furnace heat of the Colorado River's Big Bend, Las Vegas' own demon seed, Laughlin, has germinated kudzu-like into the nation's third-largest gambling center. Skyscraper casinos and luxury condos share the west bank with the mega-polluting Mojave Power Plant, which devours coal slurry pumped with water

stolen from Hopi mesas hundreds of miles to the east. Directly across the river, sprawling and violent Mojave County, Arizona-comprising Bullhead City and Kingman-provides trailer-park housing for Laughlin's minimum-wage workforce, as well as a breeding ground for antigovernment militias.

The Las Vegas "miracle," in other words, demonstrates the fanatical persistence of an environmentally and socially bankrupt system of human settlement, and confirms desert rat Edward Abbey's worst nightmares about the emergence of an apocalyptic urbanism in the Southwest. Although postmodern philosophers (who don't have to live there) delight in the Strip's supposed "hyperreality," most of Clark County is stamped from a monotonously real and familiar mold. Las Vegas, in essence, is a hyperbolic Los Angeles, the land of sunshine on fast forward.

The template for all low-density Sunbelt cities was the great boom of the 1920s, which brought 2 million midwesterners and their automobiles to Los Angeles County. Despite the warnings of an entire generation of planners and conservationists chastened by this experience, regional planning and open-space conservation again fell by the wayside during the post-1945 population explosion in Southern California. In a famous article for Fortune magazine in 1958, sociologist William Whyte described how "flying from Los Angeles to San Bernardino-an unnerving lesson in man's infinite capacity to mess up his environment-the traveler can see a legion of bulldozers gnawing into the last remaining tract of green between two cities." He baptized this insidious new growth-form "urban sprawl."

Although Las Vegas' third-generation sprawl incorporates some innovations (casino-anchored shopping centers, for instance), it otherwise recapitulates the "seven deadly sins" of Los Angeles and its Sunbelt clones like Phoenix and Orange County. Thus Las Vegas has (1) abandoned a responsible water ethic; (2) fragmented local government and subordinated it to private land-use planning; (3) produced a negligible amount of public space; (4) refused to use "hazard zoning" to mitigate natural disaster and preserve landscape; (5) dispersed land uses over an enormous area; (6) accepted the resulting dictatorship of the automobile; and (7) tolerated extreme social and, especially, racial inequality.

In Mediterranean California or the desert Southwest, water use is the most obvious measure of environmental efficiency. Accepting the constraint of local watersheds and groundwater basins is a powerful stimulus to good urban design. It focuses social ingenuity on problems of resource conservation, fosters more compact and efficient settlement patterns, and generates respect for the native landscape. In a nutshell, it makes for "smart" urbanism (as seen in modern Israel, or the classical city-states of Arab Spain or North Africa).

Southern California's departure from the path of water rectitude began with the draining of the Owens Valley and culminated with the arrival in the 1940s of cheap, federally subsidized water from the Colorado River. Hoover Dam extended the suburban frontier into the inland basins, and underpriced traditional water conservation practices like waste-water recycling and storm water recovery out of existence. Unlike Los Angeles, Las Vegas has never practiced water conservation in any form. It was born dumb.

Water profligacy also dissolves many of the bonds of common citizenship. Los Angeles County is notorious for its profusion of special-interest incorporations, "phantom cities, "county "islands," and geographical tax shelters, all designed to keep money in the immediate neighborhood. Clark County, however, manages to exceed even LA in its dilution and dispersal of public power. The Las Vegas city limits encompass barely one-third of the metropolitan population. The major regional assets-the Strip, the Convention Center, McCarran International Airport, and the University of Nevada-are all located in an unincorporated township aptly named "Paradise,"while poverty, unemployment, and homelessness are disproportionately concentrated within the boundaries of Las Vegas and North Las Vegas.

This is a political geography diabolically designed to separate tax resources from regional needs. Huge, sprawling county electoral districts weaken the power of minorities and working-class voters. Unincorporation, conversely, centralizes land-use power in the hands of an invisible government of gaming corporations and giant residential and commercial-strip developers. The enormous empty squares in the built-up urban fabric, so dramatically visible from the air, epitomize the leap-frog development that planners have denounced for generations in Southern California. Crucial habitat for endangered species like the desert tortoise is destroyed for the sake of vacant lots and urban desolation.

Both Los Angeles and Las Vegas zealously cultivate the image of infinite opportunity for fun in the sun. In reality, however, free recreation is more accessible in older eastern and midwestern cities that cherish their public landscapes. As long ago as 1909, experts were warning Los Angeles' leaders about the region's shortage of parks and public beaches. Although the beach crisis was partially ameliorated in the 1950s, Los Angeles remains the most park-poor of major American cities, with only one-third the usable per capita open space of New York.

Las Vegas, meanwhile, has virtually no commons at all; just a skinflint 1.4 acres per thousand residents (compared with the recommended national minimum of 10 acres). This park shortage may mean little to the tourist jet-skiing across Lake Mead or lounging by the pool at the Mirage, but it defines an impoverished quality of life for thousands of low-wage service workers who live in the stucco tenements that line the side streets of the Strip.

The recreation crisis in Sunbelt cities is the flip side of the failure to preserve native landscapes-another consequence of which is the loss of protection from natural hazards. The linkage between these issues is part of a lost legacy of urban environmentalism. In 1930, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., the greatest city designer of his generation, recommended "hazard zoning" to Los Angeles County as the best strategy for reducing the social costs of flood, wildfire, and earthquake. In Olmsted's sadly unrealized vision, development would be prohibited in floodplains and fire-prone foothills. These terrains, he argued, were best suited for preservation as multi-purpose "greenbelts" and wilderness parks, with the specific goal of increasing outdoor recreation for the poor.

Las Vegas is everything Olmsted most despised. Its lack of open space and its seas of concrete, for example, have greatly exacerbated its summer flash-flood problem (probably the city's best-kept secret, except for dramatic occasions as when unsuspecting tourists drowned in casino parking lots in 1992) . Like Los Angeles, Clark County has preferred to use federal

subsidies to turn its natural hydrology into an expensive plumbing system rather than use zoning to exclude development from the arroyos and washes that should have become desert equivalents to Olmsted's greenbelts.

Los Angeles, of course, was the first world metropolis to be decisively shaped by the automobile. One result was the decentralization of shopping and culture, and the relative decline of the downtown. Now a group of researchers at the University of California at Irvine suggest we are seeing in Orange County, for example, the "postsuburban metropolis," where central functions-culture and sports, the civic center, corporate headquarters, and high-end shopping-are divided among four different edge cities.

Contemporary Las Vegas again represents this tendency taken to its extreme. With the partial exception of government and law, the gaming industry has successively displaced other civic activities from the center to the margins. Tourism (and poverty) now occupy the geographical core of the region. Other, traditional downtown features like shopping areas, cultural centers, and sports and business headquarters are chaotically strewn across Las Vegas Valley with the apparent logic of a plane wreck.

Meanwhile its new suburbs stubbornly reject integration with the rest of the city. To use the nomenclature of Blade Runner, they are self-contained "Off Worlds," prizing their security and social exclusivity above all else. Summerlin, the legacy of Howard Hughes' 1970s reign as Nevada's informal monarch, is the epitome of Las Vegas' walled satellite cities. When finally built-out in the early 21st century, a population of 200,000 will be hermetically sealed in its own upscale version of Arizona's leaky Biosphere.

This atomized urban structure reinforces a slavish dependence upon the automobile. Las Vegas, according to architectural theorists like Robert Venturi, is supposed to be the apotheosis of car-defined urbanism, the mother of strips. Yet the casino boom of the last decade has made the Strip itself almost impassable. From late afternoon to past midnight, Las Vegas Boulevard is as gridlocked as the San Diego Freeway at rush hour, and its intersection with Tropicana Road may be the busiest street corner in the United States.

Today Las Vegas looks like one vast highway construction site. Nothing has been learned from the dismal California experience, not even the simple lesson that freeways only increase sprawl. When completed, the new freeway system may allow local commuters to bypass the Strip entirely, but it will also centrifuge population growth even further into the desert.

Hyper-growth also increases social inequality. Jobless immigrants far outpace the supply of new jobs; as a result, Clark County has witnessed soaring welfare caseloads, crime, mental illness, child abuse, and homelessness. The gaming industry, moreover, is still far from achieving racial or gender equality in its hiring practices and promotions. In the past, Las Vegas more than earned its reputation as "Mississippi West." While African-American entertainers were capitalizing the Strip with their talent, blacks were barred from most hotels and casinos through the 1960s. More recently, despite a booming economy, high unemployment in Las Vegas' predominantly black Westside helped precipitate four violent weekends of rioting following the Rodney King verdict in April 1992.

Inter-ethnic tension has also been on the rise in the last decade, as Latino s have supplanted African-Americans as the county's largest minority group. Indeed black leaders have spoken of "creeping Miamization" as some casino owners prefer hiring Latino immigrants over local blacks. Latinos, for their part, point to overcrowded schools, police brutality, and lack of political representation.

Like the march of Los Angeles across the San Fernando Valley, bulging Las Vegas is rapidly urbanizing the lower Colorado River Valley. The struggle to prevent history from repeating itself as farce poses tough strategic choices. Environmentalists can continue to defend natural resources and wilderness areas one at a time against the juggernaut of development—a purely defensive strategy that will probably win some individual victories, but is almost guaranteed to lose the larger war. Alternatively, they can oppose development at its source by fighting for limits on further population growth in the desert Southwest. Pursued abstractly, however, this strategy will only pigeonhole greens as the enemies of jobs and labor unions. On the margin, some environmentalists may even lose themselves in the Malthusian blind alley of border control by allying themselves with nativist groups that want to deport hardworking Latino immigrants whose per capita consumption of resources is actually far smaller than that of their native-born employers.

A better approach would focus comprehensively on the character of desert urbanization itself. "Carrying capacity," after all, is not just a linear function of population and the available resource base; it is also determined by the quantity and form of consumption. And that is ultimately a question of urban design. As Andrew Ross and other critics of "deep ecology" have long pointed out, urbanism per se is not the enemy of the environment. Indeed, cities have incredible, if largely untapped, capacities for the efficient use of scarce natural resources. Above all, they have the potential to counterpose public affluence (great libraries, parks, museums, etc.) as a real alternative to privatized consumerism, and thus cut through the apparent contradiction between improving the standard of living and accepting the limits imposed by finite natural resources. Indeed the most damning indictment against the Sunbelt city is the atrophy of classical urban (and pro-environmental) qualities like residential density, pedestrian scale, mass transit, and a wealth of public landscapes.

Instead, Sunbelt cities are stupefied by the ready availability of artificially cheap resources—water, power, and land. Bad design, in turn, has unforeseen environmental consequences. Southern Nevada's colossal consumption of electricity is a case in point. Instead of ameliorating its desert climate through creative urban design (e.g., proper orientation of buildings, maximum use of shade, minimization of heat-absorbing "hardscape," etc.), Las Vegas simply relies on universal air-conditioning. But this has only made its environment less hospitable. The combination of waste heat and vast paved surfaces transforms the city into a scorching "heat island" whose nightly temperatures are frequently 5 to 10 degrees hotter than the surrounding desert.

Fortunately, embattled western environmentalists have important new allies. In their crusade for the "New Urbanism," Peter Calthorpe, Andreas Duany, and their colleagues have reestablished a critical dialogue between urban designers and mainstream environmental groups. They have

sketched, with admirable clarity, a regional-planning model that cogently links issues of social equity (economically diverse residential areas, recreational equality, greater housing affordability through eliminating the need for second cars, a preferential pedestrian landscape for children and seniors) with key environmental concerns (on-site recycling of waste products, greenbelts, integrity of wetland ecosystems, wildlife corridors, etc.). They offer a powerful program for uniting otherwise disparate constituencies-inner-city residents, senior citizens, advocates of children, environmentalists, and so on-all of whom are fundamentally disadvantaged by the sub-urban city.

New Urbanism, of course, is only one starting point. A green politics for the urban desert would equally have to assimilate and synthesize decades of research on sustainable human habitats in drylands environments. It would also have to consider the possible alternatives to a regional economy that is increasingly being driven by casinos, theme parks, prisons, and unbridled growth. Creating a vision of an alternative urbanism, sustainable and democratic, in the Southwest is an extraordinary challenge. But this may be the last generation even given the opportunity to try.

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