

Las Vegas

The City – A Place of Consumption in the Post-Industrial Information Society (2001)

by Peter Weibel

S. 186-187

The industrial revolution has generated cities of a size above all prognoses and expectations. Poverty, misery, hygienic deficits, dust and dirt have exploded. The science of Urbanism, invented around 1900, should find a way to give cities a human face again by planning. The classical conception of a city with which these urbanists started was the city as a place of production. In the wake of the industrial revolution the city was conceived as a sequence of phases conditioned by industrial labour. You start with an assembly line. Around the assembly line you build a factory. Around the factory you build the homes of the workers. Around the homes you build shops, restaurants and other services. We can perceive the publication of a large volume entitled 'Une Cité Industrielle' by Tony Garnier in 1907 precisely in that sense. This project is a significant milestone in modern town planning, as Le Corbusier said: "The first example of urban land defined as public space and organized to accommodate amenities for the common benefit of the inhabitants (...) integrating housing, work and contact between citizens." Another title for the project was indeed 'City of Labour.'

So it is very clear, that modern city planning had as its source the idea of labour and production, on the basis of the industrial revolution. Garnier therefore conceives only three main functions for a city: production, housing and health facilities. The tyranny of production turned housing and health into the service of production. Workers had to be healthy and therefore housed well to remain stable and reliable in the production process.

Even revisions of the modern city still designed a city as a set of functions, mainly adding new functions to the classical functions of the city. The famous lecture of 1928 by Cornelis van Eesteren therefore promoted 'The idea of the functional city' (republished in Rotterdam 1997). Habitation, work and traffic are still the dominant factors in the structure of a multifunctional city. But the once fully functioning centres of craft and trade gained an enchanting beauty, which could be used as an environment for recreation. Therefore van Eesteren added to the classical functions of the city, housing, work, and traffic, the new function of the post-industrial city: recreation. To Garnier's main functions, production, housing, and health, he added: consumption.

A post-modern critique realized that the city under the spell of production is not only deteriorating the urban environment but in fact is completely dependent on the environment outside the city. The energy, the food, the water, nearly everything comes from the non-urban environment. The industrial city is not self-dependent, does not sustain itself. Sustainability therefore becomes the central critical argument against the concept of the modern city as a place of production. The urban 'footstep theory' made us realize that the city leaves many footprints in the environment outside the city. An area from ten to twenty times bigger than the area of the city itself is needed

to support the city, to make the city survive, to keep the production in the city going, to keep the operating of the city sustained. So it became evident, that a town focused on industry and production cannot survive. It not only destroys its non-urban environment outside the city, but in consequence also the city itself. Therefore the post-modern city moved the shopping area to the periphery of the city and the production and industrial zone even outside in front and far off the city. The centres of the city became vacant. The typical American city was the 'bagel city.'

But naturally the problem of sustainability was only partially solved by the post-modern non-industrial city. Responsibility for the supply of water, gas, electricity, canalisation, information wiring, food, medicine, traffic, sanitary facilities, schools, public services still has to be taken by society, by private or public institutions. Strict reduction of factories and other production sites was a first attempt to reduce the footprints in the environments and make the cities sustainable.

At the historic moment when material products of labour lost their pivotal role in the accumulation of capital in the post-industrial society, when immaterial labour, the acts of communication and services, investing in stocks and shares etc., could generate more profit than material labour, the city also changed from a centre of labour to a centre of immaterial labour such as services and communication. Consumption is part of this new kind of urban communication, just as shopping is part of consumption. As the architect Rem Koolhaas said: "Shopping has become the dominant mode of public activity," or as Mark Ravenhill said in his theatre play, "Shopping & Fucking" (1998) are the main activities in the post-industrial consumer city. A private and a public activity merge in the title, because this is exactly what the consumer city is all about: public space becomes private space. Koolhaas says: "We are witnessing the birth of the post-public, the private city." Manuel Castells has described in his book 'The Informational City' (1989) the rise of the 'dual city' in the wake of the rise of the dual economy. Dual economy means the parallel existence of an economy built on production and an economy built on information technology and the restructuring of capital-labour relationships.

Post-modern contemporary cities are no longer the places of the primary and secondary spheres of economy, that is, the spheres of production, but have become the places of the tertiary spheres of economy, that is, the spheres of communication, services, transactions. The post industrial city in the information age has become the knot in a web of universal transmissions and transactions, e.g. of goods, currencies, messages, information (all kinds of material and immaterial commodities, even cultural commodities). The first to realize this, were the 'Situationists.'¹ Consumption in the form of shopping and other leisure activities and institutions that provide a variety of leisure events have become a main part of the attraction cities today have for visitors. Therefore tourists have become more important for cities than inhabitants. The first city where you can study this phenomenon is Venice, Italy. A former place of craft and trade has become a city completely dependent on tourism. The next step in the urban evolution to a private city, a consumer city, depending completely on the non-urban environment outside of the city, is Las Vegas. Between Venice and Las Vegas are many analogies, but also differences. Venice is a model for Las Vegas as the first consumer city of the old world, as Las Vegas is the first consumer city of the new world. Therefore Las Vegas is architecturally imitating the most famous scenic views of Venice and one of the most famous hotels is called The Venetian Casino Resort Hotel. On the other hand Las Vegas was never a city of craft, production, and trade. It was conceived from the beginning as a place of consumption and recreation. From all the functions of a modern city, recreation and services became the only functions. And above all Las Vegas did not

solve the real problem of the modern city; sustainability. In fact, Las Vegas is in that sense the worst modern city. The electricity is produced by coal like in 19th century. The water comes from the environment far away from the city. Therefore Las Vegas on the one hand is the post-modern city par excellence, built on consumption, shopping, fucking, gambling, recreation and leisure, but on the other hand, Las Vegas is the cruellest modern city, completely depending on outside resources.² The modern city of production damaged the environment according to the 'footstep theory;' therefore the production units have been dislocated to the periphery of the city to avoid the confrontation with the clouds of pollution. Therefore the cities, emptied of production, turned to cities of consumption, attracting tourists and consumers. It is only consistent, that the post-modern city learned from Las Vegas, since Las Vegas with 30 to 40 million tourists a year is the post-modern city par excellence. Tourists are more cherished than the inhabitants by city planning which is symptomatic for post-modern city planning, which, as I said, is built on consumption instead of production. Everyday millions of information which control the supply of food and news, of the contents of cultural, administrative, productive and consumptive institutions are transacted by the post-modern city in the arising net society in such a complex vertical structure that it can only be maintained with the help of computers. The exchange of information, of services has become the new value, no longer the exchange of products. The exchange of products still exists, but it no longer has the classical function to maximize profit. Profit maximization can be done today much better in the tertiary sphere of economy. The triumph of the New Economy over the old economy is built on this thesis. Cities of consumption have a new way to regulate the contact between citizens. This way is no longer built on labour but on services. This change has also transformed the relation between private and public sphere. Cities of consumption are the final triumph of urbanism and communication built on principles of economy, money and profit. Cultural goods are also subjugated to these laws of economy. Cultural institutions are not measured by the quality of their labour, but by the quantity of their visitors and their profiles for tourist attractions. Cultural institutions under the power of economy turn into institutions of consumption. Event culture, branding, target marketing are not only parts of urban planning but also of cultural institutions. The new cities of the new economy are not only temples of consumption, not only paradises of ecstatic shopping of cultural or material goods, of cultural or commercial enjoyment, e.g. the multiplex cinemas which provide you with food, films, and clothing, they are above all new masks of the market, which make invisible the mechanism of capital. To tear off the urban masks of capital we no longer can rely on culture, because culture has become part of the mask as a privileged way of consumption. Cities of consumption need a constant accumulation of attraction. Institutions, which can guarantee events and spectacles on a high level, like cultural institutions of global branding, become more and more attractive for consumer cities. On the other hand, cultural institutions, which want to attract tourists, are looking for the proximity to cities of consumption. There is a new alliance on the way between institutions of consumption, formerly known as cultural institutions, and cities of consumption, formerly known as places of production.³ Therefore it follows the logic of the urban evolution in the post-industrial information society that the Guggenheim Museum is opening a new exhibition space precisely in the phantom heart of Las Vegas: the Venetian Casino Resort Hotel.

Las Vegas is the city of the future, because it is the foremost city built completely on recreational, cultural and other services.⁴ Las Vegas functions as a city because it reduces the multi-functional modern city to one function: consumption.⁵ On the other hand, Las Vegas is the city with no future. Las Vegas is, besides Venice, the foremost city of the world living from tourism, but at the same time, even emptied from production, it is still not sustainable,

but just the opposite, polluting a huge environment. Las Vegas is living on an environmental politics of dispossession. It is bound by the chains of the classical industrial city: energy supply. Las Vegas is dependent on the energy and the goods supplied by others. The energy and electricity crisis in California in 2001 is already a symptom of what can happen to Las Vegas. Las Vegas has only a future when its lights and lasers seen from far away eclipse.

1. In their book, 'The Naked City' (1957), Guy Debord and Asger Jorn criticized the modern city à la Corbusier, see Simon Sadler, 'The Situationist City' (Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).
2. Mike Davis, 'The Strip Versus Nature', in Ramesh Kumar Biswas (Ed.), 'Metropolis Now. Urban Cultures in Global Cities' (Vienna: Springer, 2000), pp. 101-110.
3. see Arthur C. Danto, 'Degas in Vegas', in: The Nation, March 1, 1999, pp. 25-28.
4. Jörg Häntzschel, 'Das Paradies in der Wüste - Las Vegas', in Regina Bittner (Ed.), 'Urbane Paradiise. Zur Kulturgeschichte modernen Vergnügens' (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2001), pp. 297-302.
5. Las Vegas can claim to have developed a deep structure transformation of consumption, which the managers of Las Vegas call 'junking it up,' as the author Norman Klein has told me in a conversation. 'Junking it up' means that the managers and architects of Las Vegas by intention make mistakes in the buildings to give the consumer the feeling that he is inhabiting an imperfect environment, which allows him to deduce that not only the architecture is occasionally junked, but that the whole Las Vegas gambling system is junked and that therefore he, the gambler, has a chance to be more perfect than the system and that therefore he can beat the system. The dominant exploitative class gives the subordinated exploited class the illusion to be able to be superior by voluntary and intentional deterioration, errors, mistakes, by 'junking it up.' The 'junkie' gets the illusion to be not dependent and governed and ruled by consumption: This is the deep structure strategy of neoliberal consumerism.