

Kelli Stewart
Architectural Programming
Professor Jean VonBargen
Program Research Exhibit
12.05.06

What is A Green Casino?

Las Vegas is subjected to the placelessness of the Mojave Desert. It is a placeless place made tangible by the support of those who believe in it: in other words, it is a mirage. What should be an uninhabitable, unsustainable environment is successfully sustaining a fantasy shared by 50 million tourists per year. Such strong sponsorship should not be ignored or deemed unviable by pessimists who wish Las Vegas would simply implode on itself like a black hole sun.

The goal of this project is to impose a cure on a community that can afford its consequences, in an ecoregion that cannot. More specifically, the goal is to *design an ecologically minded resort/casino that will push the limits of green design in Las Vegas without compromising local cultural values.*

Introducing sustainability to Las Vegas requires exploiting it, making it glamorous enough to thrive. Therefore, it is important in this project to understand how buildings communicate their intentions to the user. Because this particular building is a fusion of “green buildings” and “resort/casinos”, it is important to first investigate the components that define this hybrid. What is the image of a casino? What is the image of a green building? How do these images compare and contrast? By answering these questions, a building typology can emerge and major issues can finally be assessed.

Casino Investigation: Grand Ronde’s Spirit Mountain Casino

Swerve down an isle of illuminated trees that spread open to a yellow grid of infinite parking options. Bordering this is a flamboyant façade covered with Native American patterns gone glam. The approach is in sync with Robert Venturi’s prescription

for a typical hotel-casino complex: it contains a building that is near enough to the highway to be seen from the road across the parked cars, yet far enough back to accommodate driveways, turnarounds, and parking. The parking in front is a token: it reassures the customers but does not obscure the building (Venturi, 34).

Circulation within the building is counter-intuitive. It seems circular until unanticipated gateways (for example, two trees that seem to grow up from the ground) entice visitors onto various tangents. Themed rooms are organized in spontaneous adjacencies so that visitors are unable to travel in a linear progression but must backtrack several times in order to pass through each room.

In addition to the variety there is much repetition. Slot machines line the walls, converge around two to three foot diameter columns, or line up in rows. Because the holiday season is here the structural columns all have icicles dripping and snowflakes dangling from an imaginary eave. This holiday flair competes with the permanent bands of neon light and reflective blue panels that sit atop a river rock podium.

The first step of the casino's entry sequence attempts to describe the Grand Ronde Tribe's heritage. Artificial sky is revealed through a domed ceiling with a neon turquoise border of light. The floor tiles reflect this as the circular pattern of tiles dominates the linear path that collides with it. Centered beneath the sky there is a larger than life squaw and her child kneeling beside a plaque that tells their story. This snapshot of history greets those who enter through one of the two main entrances. At the dominant entrance, this circle of life motif serves to highlight the free slot pull where guests line up for a chance to win one million dollars without risking a cent.

Obvious attention is paid to the balance between Disney set flamboyance and profit oriented business. The hallway leading to the casino terminates at awkwardly placed ATM machines. Placed as if they were accidentally left out of the overall design scheme, they support Norman Klein's argument that by "junking up" or suggesting that the casino is not quite finished, the management wants guests to assume that the odds are not finished either (Klein, 19). While avoiding any celebration of the customer spending money, the Spirit Mountain casino invests a great deal of excessive effort in decorating its space. Ceilings may be interrupted like film cuts by parabolic shapes: curved hanging objects; animotronic trickery; shadow boxes of pirate treasure; overhanging faux

shrubbery (Klein, 25). Specific to this casino, the dark blue ceiling with scattered constellations of light gives infinite height to an unusually low ceiling.

Green Building Investigation: Fariborz Maseeh College of Engineering and Computer Science, Portland State University

This institutional building wears its Green like a Boy Scout badge, proudly stating that its goal is to teach and inform. Any stranger to this building who wanders in (like myself) will easily find informative displays on each floor, addressing different issues as they pertain to that particular floor. Barren surfaces, and unobstructed lines guide visitors to these otherwise humble ambassadors.

On the first floor, a framed poster lists a summary of green merits associated with the construction of this building. It attained LEED gold, 90% of the deconstruction/construction waste was recycled or salvaged, and there are recycling & waste sorting facilities on every floor (though they are actually just small closed off rooms with lights left on at all times and 2 garbage bins against the wall). Also, locally produced materials were used throughout the building, and materials with recycled contents were specified during construction (fly ash, concrete, steel insulation, resilient flooring, carpeting, interior paint).

The second floor has a wall placard in a similar location. This particular one is dedicated to the building's use of water. A roof top rainwater harvesting system goes to the second floor hydrology lab where it is used for all lab experiments, then sent to the first floor restrooms for flushing toilets. The second through fifth floors have waterless urinals that instead use gravity and bio-based oil to drain and trap odors. Native and drought tolerant species minimize irrigation needs and the building uses 40% less water than conventional building that abide by Oregon codes. In addition to a plaque, the second floor has a diorama of its rainwater harvesting system. A power point presentation on loop on the computer monitor placed behind a wall of glass. In the darkness behind it is the star of the show: "Stormwater 360". The function of stormwater 360 is acted out in cartoons and photographs: rainwater is collected from any of the 6 roof drains and put

into a water storage tank. It is sent through the filter for particle removal, then to the UV disinfection unit, then to the pressure tank, then to the chlorination unit, and finally to the hydrology lab.

By the third floor's similarly placed exhibit, it is obvious that each floor has been assigned a theme. Here the built in wall exhibit deals with transportation. The display contains a monitor showing real time traffic footage. Perhaps to heighten awareness of the ceaseless need to travel.

The fourth floor's wall placard is dedicated to energy. Some statistics listed are as follows: the building uses 45% less energy than other buildings abiding by Oregon code, natural day-lighting is employed, as are dimmer controls and occupancy sensors, there is efficiency and insulation in the building envelope, and a geothermal heating and cooling system minimizes drinking water waste and recirculates well water.

On the fifth and final floor the wall placard reads: "GREEN DESIGN". This building is within walking distance to the streetcar and other Trimet amenities, there is a bike parking room with lockers, Feul Flex cars are located across from the main entrance and are used by employees and paid for by PSU, and again, the system for rainwater harvesting is accentuated as an important feature of the college.

SUMMARY: COMPARE / CONTRAST

If both the Spirit Mountain Casino and the Fariborz Maseeh College of Engineering and Computer Science were marketed to the Las Vegas audience, they would each lack enough appeal to thrive. For the green building it is a lack of glamour inherent in its functional attitude, for the casino it is a lack of tact in it's overzealous attempt to be glamorous. Ideally there should be a compromise between the profit-oriented plot of the casino management and the restrictive standards required for sustainability: an elegant way for the two to collide.

A green building is without a doubt, a good idea in any circumstance. By building a rapport with the public, a green building becomes an evangelist for its type. Therefore, a green building should be more sensational by putting its most tactile elements closer to its users. The Stormwater 360 hides its water in heavy opaque tanks forbidding users to sense the gradual purification of the water within. Wall placards do not contain enough

visual imagery to entice users from across a room. The visibility of the college's green amenities is concentrated in its words rather than in the experience of walking through the building.

A casino, on the other hand, is not always necessary, which is why more effort is put into procuring attention. Implied extravagance indicates to its users that an investment in their visit has been made. However, a casino can be less gaudy and still stimulate its users to spend their money. The absence of theme should be considered as it may harm the reputation of the theme being portrayed. The Spirit Mountain Casino dresses up in many themes, one of which is its American Indian costume. Though this theme is authentic, it encourages associations between the Grande Ronde Tribal values and the casino's value: money. Perhaps that is why the theme is forgotten about as soon as one enters the gaming rooms.

A green building that happens to be a casino should not make green into a theme. Exploiting it as functional rather than thematic preserves the sanctity of green buildings. Green building functions should be highly visible as in the Fariborz Maseeh College of Engineering and Computer Science. The motives for visible green differ in a casino, changing how green is manifested. For example, leaving green building functions exposed serves the same "junking up" strategy as mentioned by Norman Klein to convince gamblers that the odds are better. Seeing water in the process of being purified or seeing the energy chases running from a pv panel to object it electrifies allows users/gamblers to feel like they are in the know. Preserving the sensationalism of a casino in such a way should never be compromised, especially in a green casino.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Klein, Norman. "Scripting Las Vegas: Noir Naifs, Junking Up, and the New Strip." *The Grit Beneath the Glitter*. Los Angeles: University of California P, 2002. 17-29.

Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. *Learning From Las Vegas - Revised Edition: the Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Revised ed. The MIT P, 1977.