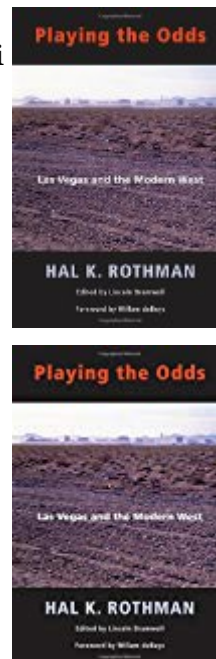


**Lawrence J. Mullen.** *Las Vegas: Media and Myth*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007. xvii + 165 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7391-2075-0.

**Hal K. Rothman.** *Playing the Odds: Las Vegas and the Modern West*. Edited by Lincoln Bramwell. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007. xix + 262 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8263-2112-1.



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During regular pilgrimages to Las Vegas, joining the millions of visitors who do the same each year, I am always struck by how much the place has changed. The world's most dazzling entertainment mecca that dwarfs its closest competitors, Monte Carlo and Macau ("The Monte Carlo of the East"), Las Vegas relies on the pursuit of pleasure for a price. Yet, it is more than its glitzy surface. Two recent books by University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), scholars, Lawrence J. Mullen's *Las Vegas* and Hal K. Rothman's *Playing the Odds*, provide thought-provoking accounts of the Las Vegas phenomenon told by a host of local commentators, mostly media gatekeepers. Both vol-

umes seek to uncover the true character of this remarkable place, and to show how it has evolved and how the community has responded to constant change, a view most tourists would not recognize. Together, these books provide valuable lessons on urban growth for cities of the twenty-first century and insights into the future of community building in democratic societies.

Like all stories about special places, the success story of Las Vegas can be attributed to a geographic fluke. Blessed with abundant springs, the largest city in Clark County and the state of Nevada began humbly as a watering hole in a vast forbidding desert, in Paiute territory near the Old

Spanish Trail (*las vegas* means “the meadows” in Spanish). By the 1850s, the trail was used for mail delivery, for travel by Mormon missionaries (who would establish a stronghold in the Las Vegas area), and as a speedy route to the California Gold Rush.[1] Wealthy easterners soon headed west. Montana senator and developer William Andrews Clark (for whom the county is named) helped them by building the San Pedro, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake Railroad in 1902 to connect the Union Pacific with Southern California. Three years later, Clark established the soon-to-be incorporated city for his railroad operations, “in the meadow” around Fremont Street, known as “Glitter Gulch.” In the decades following the Great Depression, the U.S. government further capitalized on the geography, desert climate, and clear skies, building major projects that fueled the local economy: Hoover Dam, Nellis Air Force Base, and the Department of Energy’s Nevada nuclear test site. But gambling (now called gaming), legalized in 1931, provided the city with a steady revenue stream. It also helped propel an increasingly robust tourist industry lured by Las Vegas’s growing image as “Sin City,” geared toward the adult pleasures of money, sex, alcohol, and an endless nightlife. To avoid taxes and city control, in 1941, Thomas Hull built two hotels along Highway 91, just outside the city limits, launching development of what would become the city’s main drag, Las Vegas Boulevard, known simply and seductively as “the Strip.” In December 1946, Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel, a mobster with ties to Hollywood, followed suit by opening the Flamingo, the first of the glamorous, Miami-style leisure resort casinos that provided top-notch entertainment. A decade-long boom in Strip development followed, portrayed in such films as *Ocean’s Eleven* (1960, its later remake and their sequels) and Martin Scorsese’s *Casino* (1995) that showed the glittering and brutal sides of Nevada’s real estate dealings.

In the late 1960s, Yale architecture Professor Robert Venturi, along with fellow architects

Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, focused on Las Vegas’s built environment as commercial spectacle. Their work resulted in the seminal book, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (1972), perhaps the first to recognize the city as a phenomenon of consumer capitalism. The town built by postwar entrepreneurs in the era of Siegel and developer Del Webb formed a pattern of building that also served as a multidimensional system of signs and contributed to the area’s emerging automobile-dominated suburban landscape.[2] Venturi’s team, in deciphering the Strip, saw it as a recognizable and cohesive place whose resorts were aimed mostly at middle-class Southern Californians seeking close and relatively inexpensive vacations. The Strip resorts were typically designed as shopping center-sized boxes, rejecting modernism through thematic decoration on their highway-facing facades, and located in a sea of surface parking lots. During this first wave of development, properties along the Strip were further differentiated through elaborate, freestanding neon signs aimed at motorists. While the earliest Strip hotels sported Spanish and Western themes, later billboards flashed “Sands,” “Dunes,” “Sahara,” and “Stardust” to advertise the newer pleasure-giving versions of the desert.

Venturi’s Las Vegas of the late 60s, however, bit the proverbial dust. With fierce competition for tourist dollars and the resulting rise in land values, phase 2 of the Strip’s evolution began on New Year’s Eve 1988, with the opening of the Mirage, the first of the corporate-owned mega-resorts catering to a wide demographic spectrum of domestic and international visitors. McCarran International Airport, located at the Strip’s southern end, broadened Las Vegas’s reach, while the Mirage phase signaled a second building boom that added thousands of new hotel rooms, culminating in the MGM Grand, the largest hotel in the world at the time. The famed neon signs immortalized in the opening of Francis Ford Coppola’s *One from*

*the Heart* (1982) were soon dwarfed by buildings transformed into hyperbolized, place-based simulacra, symbols of the “new” Las Vegas seen in the 1995 films *Showgirls* and *Leaving Las Vegas*. Developer Jay Sarno’s Circus Circus, the first of this type, still looks like a giant carnival tent. From the outside, the New York/New York property is a collage of Manhattan symbols complete with looming replicas of the Brooklyn Bridge and Statue of Liberty. Resort developer Steve Wynn’s elegant Bellagio evokes the quiet northern Italian town nestled on the shore of an eleven-acre version of Lake Como, complete with dancing fountains. Today, the CityCenter project nods at a Las Vegas to come. The Strip is Manhattanizing, going past postmodernism and the pastiche of the *belle époque* Paris LV, to a vertical, polished, sophisticated, and car-free city, thanks to pedestrian bridges and efficient bus and monorail systems. Designed by world-class architects, such as CityCenter’s Cesar Pelli and Sir Norman Foster, dense stand-alone buildings (with time-share condominiums) are rising. Linked together, they form a single, Strip-based adult theme park where visitors can be who they want to be and do what they want to do depending on how much they are willing to pay for it.

By the time of its centennial in 2005, Las Vegas had swelled from the 110 acres of ranch land auctioned to form the city’s original boundaries to a sprawling boomtown of cookie-cutter developments of Los Angeles’s proportions. Consisting of an array of named and gated communities, many governed by powerful homeowners’ associations, the Las Vegas Valley is the fastest growing area in the nation in terms of population. Both Mullen’s *Las Vegas* and Rothman’s *Playing the Odds* are written by “nonnatives” who look beyond Las Vegas’s consumer-seducing image to explore its reality as a unique, yet contemporary American urbanized area with real socioeconomic problems. Both authors address the theme of livable community through the voices of the participants in

the process of change, witnesses to history who, for the most part, are boosters who have helped to shape the “new” Las Vegas. Both books look at what it means to dwell in a particular place at a particular time through an array of provocative sound bites. Together, the two works provide a moving account of how we grasp a city’s truth, going beyond image to understand its underlying character, finding ways to address its challenges while defying the old adage that “what happens in Las Vegas, stays in Las Vegas.” Even more important, the authors give us insight into what we value and how we might want to live as citizens of the world.

Journalism Professor Mullen conducted most of his interviews with forty-four media producers and public figures from 1999-2001; they are published as excerpts in his *Las Vegas*. In this compendium of oral histories, his respondents, mostly transplants from other places, bring to light a notion that became apparent to Mullen post 9/11: that media contribute to bringing people together, not just in Las Vegas, which serves to some extent as his case study, but in general. The book is divided into five chapters: “Newspapers,” “Radio,” “Television,” and “Politics,” with the fifth an array of miscellaneous interviews, called “Communicators, Comedians, and Critics.” An intimate “talking heads” in print, *Las Vegas* reveals a sense of loss for what used to be a small, more cohesive community during the pre-corporate, pre-Mirage days, when entrepreneurs and their families actually lived in town. It also reveals a growing sense of disenfranchisement that has accompanied a staggering migration of strangers during Las Vegas’s phenomenally rapid growth period, one marked by constant turnover and increasing multiculturalism in a place that has come to mean both hope and desperation.

Mullen’s interviews, as a whole, provide a surprisingly cohesive image of the “true” Las Vegas. Public Radio President Lamar Marchese calls it a “city of permanent transients” so that the pub-

lic's loyalty is usually elsewhere (p. 53). Gay talk show host Tom Moilanen agrees. For him, Las Vegas is a cold, prefabricated town, with transients who come as a last ditch effort to escape the life in their hometown that is no longer viable. For Jill Campbell, general manager of Cox Communications, the local cable provider, the sense of reality is lost. Las Vegas is viewed as the Promised Land where people can make lots of money. UNLV historian Michael Green concurs, saying it is "a place of second chances," although comedian Pat Cooper believes the true motivation for most is greed and "no concern for tomorrow" (pp. 15, 117). Deputy Special Public Defender Dayvid Figler says that people who come here are not seeking to recreate the circumstances they left behind. He calls Las Vegas the "melting pot of melting pots" (p. 117). For him, it is also the "Madonna of cities-- constantly there on the top of the charts, but boy, we sure look different than we did five years ago" (p. 119). Because of the number of newcomers, weatherman Nate Tannenbaum also remarks that despite its strong image there is no sense of history. Therefore, in agreeing, public relations mogul Billy Vassiliadis says people take literally what the media is telling them, which gives the gatekeepers a special responsibility, requiring them to be both informative and repetitive.

Vassiliadis also says that Las Vegas has two personalities: one for those who come to be entertained and another for those who come to live there. It is different from most cities, according to *Las Vegas Review-Journal* editor Thomas Mitchell: it is a one-industry town, open twenty-four hours a day. This also produces more latchkey kids, says former Nevada Governor Mike O'Callaghan, now executive editor of the *Las Vegas Sun*. Journalist John L. Smith feels the twenty-four-hour gambling image is a detractor that is bad for the country and lessens any sense of community by association with sin and outlaws. Carla Gonzalez, the city's most popular DJ who got the job because she had "what it takes to follow Howard Stern," says

the town is getting more and more Hispanic and more corporate (p. 45). This translates on the airwaves as "no local bands" and no local music. FM host Chad Simmons feels catering to the broadest possible market keeps the fantasy alive and maintains the resort atmosphere. This marketing appeal also undercuts reporting on major local issues, according to former Mayor Jan Jones, who characterizes the media as sensationalist and "lazy," not interested in community issues unless they are scandalous (p. 105).

Rod Smith, editor and publisher of the Las Vegas Press, sees the community as "feudal," not committed to educating its children, with more emphasis on vocational school than college preparation (p. 36). Tom Axtell, general manager of the local PBS affiliate, says some of this is because there is no sense of community; the lack of personal income taxes also translates into a lack of responsibility. Emily Neilson, director of programming at KLAS-TV, also sees this situation as a result of the bifurcated demographics: a growing population of residents under thirty-five (which local politician Lynette Boggs McDonald says brings high teenage pregnancy and drop out rates) and over fifty-five (which political consultant Sig Rogich says will result in Las Vegas becoming a retirement community like Florida). Union political director Glen Arnodo calls Las Vegas an "old boys' network," where the developers and casino owners rule, resulting in an economy that is not diversified, according to McDonald. Senator Richard Bryan says the service clubs are struggling to survive, while Jose Melendrez of the Hispanic Leadership Institute sees the casinos as the biggest competitor with college.

Finally, Jones claims that Las Vegas has no sense of community. The city is divided, she explains, into four suburban quadrants with no traditional urban centers and people are only united by "aggravation over transportation issues" (p. 105). For columnist Ruthe Deskin, Las Vegas is a collection of small towns with a large senior pop-

ulation. O'Callaghan sees Las Vegas's communities as cross-pollinating among the twenty-plus homeowners associations, parishes, civic clubs, and various groups. Long-time resident Bob Stodel, general manager of *Las Vegas One*, the twenty-four-hour cable news and information channel, sees a loss in an overall sense of community coupled with the rise in the collection of smaller ones. Mayor Oscar Goodman, however, explains that Las Vegas's communities are formed not by physical proximity to one's neighbors but by affinities, such as religious organizations. Elaine Wynn, Las Vegas's honorary First Lady and wife of famed resort developer Steve Wynn, can attest to this. She calls the Las Vegas she knew when first moving to this "company town" in 1967 "quite lovely ... a Palm Springs with neon" (p. 133). But concerned her children would grow up in an environment limited to the "desert and the sand and the hotels," like many newcomers who reach out to communities of affinity, she got involved with her local synagogue (p. 133).

The voice of Rothman, author of *Playing the Odds*, is curiously missing among Mullen's *Las Vegas* interviews. Rothman was former chair of the UNLV History Department, where he taught for fourteen years after first moving to Henderson, a suburb in the fastest growing part of the Las Vegas Valley. Rothman was a large voice in American environmental history until his untimely death in February 2007, at the age of forty-eight (from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease). A prolific writer elected to the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame and longtime editor of *Environmental History* magazine, he wrote several particularly noteworthy books on Las Vegas-related tourism: *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth Century American West* (1998), *Neon Metropolis: How Las Vegas Started the 21st Century* (2002), and *The Grit beneath the Glitter: Tales from the Real Las Vegas* (2002), an anthology coedited with Mike Davis. General themes in Rothman's body of work are the effects of tourism

on place making and the constant stream of outsiders tourism requires; and the parallels in growth, development, and attitudes toward land use in the western states, particularly comparing the Golden State of California and its neighbor, the Silver State of Nevada.

*Playing the Odds* is Rothman's sixteenth and final book. Published posthumously, it contains sixty-six essays he wrote for various publications from 1998 to 2006. The bulk is made up of his eight-hundred-word weekly opinion columns for the *Las Vegas Sun* written in the last year of his life. The introduction argues that the age of preservation is over and we have now entered the recreation age, in which the Wild West has become essentially a place to play. The collection is organized thematically into four parts: "Las Vegas as First City of the Twenty-First Century," "Las Vegas as Community," "The Western Environment," and "Looking beyond Las Vegas' Borders." Collectively, Rothman's pieces reveal the inner musings of a dedicated public intellectual and outspoken skeptic who made his living, he says, "explaining how the country has changed" (p. 235). In contrast to Mullen who gathers evidence and lets the reader draw the conclusions, Rothman gives us reasons why things are the way they are and takes a moral stand on issues important to him, questioning whether America has changed for the better. He ventures still further to offer recommendations for ways to resolve urban ills that can be applied generally: for example, to provide efficient transportation systems and affordable housing near jobs for middle-class workers, and to promote social responsibility. *Playing the Odds* is about courage and risk taking, about a lone voice charting the dangerous territory of human values, and betting on an outcome that hopefully will move humanity forward.

In part 1, Rothman explains why Las Vegas is both an anomaly and harbinger of things to come, hence his label for it as "First City of the Twenty-First Century" (p. 1). Like Mullen, he characterizes

the city as a strange hybrid. It is a one-industry town (based on gaming in a resort zone five miles long and eight blocks wide with over 130,000 hotel rooms) that is also postindustrial and makes a successful living catering to what Rothman calls “the wide middle” (p. 5). It is a tourist mecca that he compares to Prague (Prague sells “old,” Las Vegas sells “new”), a city of illusion that “made a ritual out of leisure,” and of high creativity, the Strip being “the largest investment of private money in public art anywhere in the world” (p. 6). It is also a retirement village for the 25 percent of the population that are seniors, dependent on municipal services but typically voting as a block against measures to increase funding for them (schools, libraries, roads, etc.). The economy, based solely on a service-oriented industry, is supported by an enormous, multicultural workforce made up of new immigrants (who tend to be poorer and with larger families). These workers are finding it increasingly difficult to live decently given the rise in high-end housing units for wealthier, aging boomers. Hence, the turnover is rapid, and transience has become a way of life. Communities, as Mullen’s interviewees also mentioned, are based on affinities. Newcomers, according to Rothman, recreate their way of life in suburban enclaves, where powerful homeowners’ associations, which he admits “everyone hates,” are essential to the police force and to maintain property values without offering municipal services (p. 57). In defense of mixed-use, higher density developments, he writes that their goal “is to create live, work, and play environments. We’ve got the play part down. The work part is coming along. The live piece is still a long way off” (p. 72).

In part 2, Rothman tackles a number of local issues: the division of the school district, the naming of a new school after casino-builder Webb, the need to invest in the Las Vegas Convention Center, the reasons behind low local voter turnout, the ways to expand the McCarran Airport and Interstate 15 (the area’s connection to Southern Califor-

nia), and so on. Part 3, “The Western Environment,” presents a broader look at sustainability in the western United States from a tourism-related perspective. In “The Perils of Ecotourism,” Rothman claims that locals must be what visitors want them to be in order to feed their families, a practice that challenges the existing structure of local communities. Tourism produces “the most colonial of colonial economies” (p. 141). For Rothman, the “process of scripting space both physically and psychically defines tourist towns and resorts” (p.142).

As an environmentalist, Rothman also focuses in part 3 on water issues, calling for proactive conservation strategies and reallocation through renegotiation of the Law of the River, the 1922 federal Colorado River Compact. He argues for a super regional water authority that would provide an equitable amount to Clark County that generates 80 percent of Nevada’s revenue. He takes his most impassioned environmental stand in “Dumping Nuclear Waste,” opposing the George W. Bush administration’s proposed Yucca Mountain federal repository (pp. 181-183).

Finally, in part 4, Rothman looks beyond Las Vegas’s borders to apply the lessons he has learned from his adopted city. An advocate of grassroots democracy, he suggests building a Statue of Responsibility in the San Francisco Bay to serve as a bookend for the Statue of Liberty and symbolize the link between freedom and the citizen’s role in maintaining a democratic society. Furthering his commitment to civic engagement, he also critiques a number of discrepancies in America’s urban planning and development practices, especially the anti-sprawl movement and, to some extent, New Urbanism. For example, he claims that green growth boundaries in Boulder and Portland allow those who are rich and white to “hide behind the moats of green space” instead of recognizing and embracing diversity (p. 209). He praises Steamboat Springs instead, his favorite place to ski, for being a town first, then a resort,

whose locals have worked to guard its authenticity and identity. In contrast, he calls Santa Fe “the most fraudulent tourist town in America,” where despite local minimum wage laws much like those in effect in Las Vegas, workers cannot afford decent housing, a dilemma also facing most Colorado ski towns (p. 56).

*Playing the Odds* ends with a previously unpublished allegory, “Disneyland’s Lesson.” In it, Rothman recounts what he learned from a visit with his five-year-old son to the Magic Kingdom in 2000, on one of the busiest days of the year. During the hectic trip, the two ducked into “Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln,” a Main Street staple, “for a short stay out of the mayhem” (p. 256). After sitting quietly and listening to the robotic president and then returning to the park’s frenzy outside, Rothman was struck that American democratic ideals have been replaced in our culture with liberal consumerism. “The right to choose our goods,” he writes, “has become more important than the right to choose our friends” (p. 257).

I would have liked to have known him and had him give me a tour of his Las Vegas.

#### Notes

[1]. For a concise history, see also Julie A. Deric, “Las Vegas, Nevada,” in *Encyclopedia of American Urban History*, ed. David Goldfield (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007), 427-429.

[2]. Mark Gottdiener, *The Theming of America, Dreams, Visions, and Commercial Spaces* (Boulder: Westview, 1997), 99.

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