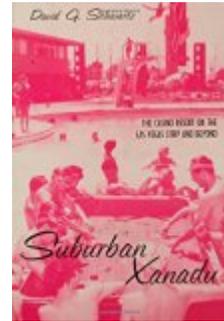


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David G. Schwartz. *Suburban Xanadu: The Casino Resort on the Las Vegas Strip and Beyond*. New York and London: Routledge, 2003. xi + 243 pp. \$45.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-93557-9; \$140.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-93556-2.

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The Entertainment Capital of the World and How It Got That Way

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While I was reading David Schwartz's *Suburban Xanadu*, the H-West forum exploded with a thread of contributors concerned about the Western History Association. It seemed that quite a few historians were dissatisfied with the session topics at the 2003 meeting at Fort Worth (as opposed to those who were satisfied). Quite a few more were unhappy with the selection of the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas as headquarters for the 2004 WHA meeting (as opposed to those who were happy about it). Feminists decried the idea of holding a meeting at a hotel that featured a topless revue, others showed a distaste for gambling, and one e-mail suggested putting the topless revue in the same context as prostitution in the Old West as a legitimate area of study. This last suggestion provoked protest at equating morally upright young women earning honest money going topless with immoral horizontal women earning (alleged) dishonest money as prostitutes. No one mentioned what dance hall girls did upstairs and no one suggested examining the history of Nevada in general or Las Vegas in particular as part of the Western experience.

Happily, David Schwartz has taken on that task (the history, not the dance hall girls), combining scholarship and an excellent writing style with a fair sense of humor to explore how the Las Vegas Strip got to be the way it is. It hardly bears mentioning that in printing the facts, he demolishes legends. One interesting fact is that the Las

Vegas Strip is in Clark County, not the City of Las Vegas; its location frees the Strip from city ordinances and taxes. Schwartz focuses on the Strip as a theme more than a place. The phenomenon of the casino resort hotel has generated its appeal and popularity with an image of fantasy that tourists as often as not would not (and have not) tolerated in their own back yard. >From its origins as a Depression era town that in 1931 welcomed Nevada's approval of legalized gambling, Las Vegas became the main desert oasis of the state, moving beyond Reno because of the casino resort concept. Professional gamblers could patronize casinos, but entrepreneurs built and rebuilt their hotels to attract a broader spectrum of tourists.

Schwartz argues convincingly that the heyday of organized crime figures running hotels was brief, and the role of Ben Siegel (forget Siegel's epiphany in the movie *Bugsy*) was greatly exaggerated. The hotels became victims of their own success; lacking the capital necessary to build high-rise towers and all that went with them, the crime figures gave way to the Kerkorians and designers such as Martin Stern who created escapist fantasies as destination resorts. Howard Hughes, for all the publicity about his hotel and land purchases, made little impression on the evolution of casino resorts. The Nevada Gaming Commission kept the casinos honest. By the 1990s hotels catered to entire families in an attempt to render obsolete the "my parents went to Vegas and all I got was this t-shirt" approach to children.

The book also provides an excellent introduction to how casinos are run, and interviews with employees from pit bosses to show girls present a rounded view of casino/hotel operations. Schwartz also moves beyond Las Vegas to survey Atlantic City, Mississippi riverboats, other states legalizing gambling, and the impact of Indian casinos. In sum, the book succeeds both at the level of scholarly investigation and as a fascinating account of a major source of guilty pleasure in America.

One final note: Schwartz did not mention the hotel museum tucked away in a corner of the Tropicana Hotel. Glass display cases contain chips, photographs,

and memorabilia from Strip hotels. Viewing them provides a capsule history of the trajectory of Las Vegas development. Some hotels came and went, demolished by spectacular televised implosions rather than mundane wrecker balls. Other hotels tried to fulfill the goal of providing so many attractions that guests would not want to visit the competitors. WHA members coming to Las Vegas in October 2004 will find *Suburban Xanadu* a useful way of putting it all in perspective. They may want to take some time out to visit the museum just to see that the mighty do fall and have fallen, their places taken by ever more imaginative creations.

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