

## Las Vegas, a Guilty Pleasure

Jets of water spurt hundreds of feet into the air in front of the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada. Their graceful movements, choreographed to a heartbreaking song by Celine Dion, provide a lavish backdrop for throngs of tourists roaming the Strip where the city's great casinos lie. From the street, the horizon has been obscured by luxurious buildings, sparkling fountains, and dazzling lights. Thousands of people are basking in the glitz and glitter of this city of delight.

This fantastic atmosphere is all that many visitors to Nevada experience; it's easy to fly into Las Vegas and spend a few days and a fortune without ever leaving the city limits. Only those who drive to Las Vegas get a real sense of their surroundings. Cracked, brown earth and scraggly cacti roast under the sun along the highway into the city. This is no lush landscape; it is a desert. Yet despite the extreme scarcity of water and temperatures that regularly soar above 100° F, Las Vegas has been America's fastest growing city for the past fifteen years. A booming economy built on gambling and tourism has led to a population explosion, and increasing demands have stretched Nevada's water supply to its limits: the groundwater has been drained to the point where the land has begun to subside, and the state cannot draw any more from the Colorado River. Las Vegas' dilemma raises an important question: can urban growth be sustained in the desert? In this parched region that receives a scant four inches of rain a year, is there enough water to supply a growing city already packed with 1.4 million inhabitants?

Two authorities on the Southwest offer their perspectives on the topic. Hal Rothman, a professor of history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, presents an economic analysis defending the city's growth in his 2001 **Urban Ecology** article, "Urban Oasis: Cash Keeps Las Vegas Lush... and It Should." According to Rothman, Las Vegas can use its wealth to ensure sufficient water for the future. Author and professor of Urban Theory at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, Mike Davis imparts a more environmentally conscious view. In his 1995 **Sierra** article, "House of Cards," he attacks the careless mindset that has led to Las Vegas' wasteful water practices. The two authors' attitudes toward the use and distribution of water represent opposite ends of the spectrum, and they both tend toward narrow-minded thinking that clouds their grasp of the issue. Incomplete perspective

Rothman defines the situation in Las Vegas as one of simple economics, where water is just another commodity to be traded on the market. "In the American West, water is an institutional question instead of one of supply. Availability is not the question. Free-flowing water has become simply a question [...] of who will pay what for the water and who elsewhere will give it up" (Rothman 15). Though this declaration smacks of arrogance, it is not an unfounded claim: the Hoover Dam and miles of piping have managed to transform an uninhabitable wasteland into paradise. Armed with our ingenuity and the limitless powers of technology, we have conquered the desert. Despite our past success, this sort of pride can be misleading. In reality, the Colorado River has been pushed to its limits, and its last trickle evaporates miles before reaching the sea. In addition, Las Vegas is not the only metropolis seeking more water. Other Sunbelt cities are also clamoring for more water from the Colorado River, and it seems more than a

little foolish to speak of limitless supplies. Availability is definitely an issue. And with such controversy cropping up amidst the Southwestern states, Las Vegas and its water consumption have come under the spotlight.

Unashamed, Rothman makes no attempt to deny the city's reckless expenditure of water, actually naming Las Vegas as the city that consumes the most water per person in the entire nation. After mentioning the hourly water show in front of the Bellagio, he notes that "water in Las Vegas 'is displayed more lasciviously than sex'" (Jacques Leslie qtd. in Rothman 15). This is quite an admission in Sin City, where simply walking down the street elicits a bombardment of adult-entertainment fliers. With such obviously wasteful water policies in effect and conflict among the states over water rights, where can Las Vegas turn to for more water? Agriculture and ranching, responds Rothman.

Agriculture and ranching receive the majority of Nevada's water, and they do not put it to good use. Even when supported by the federal government, these rural sectors contribute little to the state's economy: "Eighty percent of the water produces a minuscule percentage of jobs, revenue, taxes, and other income for the state" (Rothman 15). Cultivating the arid Southwest is unprofitable to begin with, and water made cheap by government subsidies is often squandered by farmers using flood-ditch irrigation. The glaring inefficiency of farming and ranching provides a simple solution to Las Vegas' water dilemma: a reallocation from rural areas to the city. However, despite both a larger population base and much greater economic success, this reallocation has gone slowly. Rothman explains that the process is impeded by congressional representatives that continue to support farmers and ranchers in the West (17).

While Rothman turns his critical eye on water consumption outside the city, Davis stays focused on the wastefulness of Las Vegas. “Las Vegas disdains to live within its means. Instead, it is aggressively turning its profligacy into a kind of environmental terrorism against its neighbors.... What Las Vegas cannot buy from Arizona farmers, it seems determined to divert from the Virgin River [...] or steal from the ranchers in the Nye and Lincoln counties” (Davis 38). Davis paints an ugly picture of Las Vegas: he portrays the city as a greedy monster, deliberately gobbling up everything around with little thought of the consequences. For him, the farmers and ranchers are helpless victims, innocents whose livelihoods are threatened by the city.

Unfortunately, this is simply not the case. Besides receiving the majority of the state’s water, the farmers and ranchers are guilty of the same wastefulness as the city-dwellers. Losing water by flooding fields in the desert is just as careless as tossing it into the sky with a fountain. While missing this fact does prove Davis a bit naive, his shortsightedness is understandable. Las Vegas’ over-consumption of water can be so blatant that it’s hard to see anything else. After all, here in the middle of a desert, men have had the audacity to “propose turning downtown’s Fremont Street into a pseudo-Venetian Grand Canal” (Davis 38). Gambling and prostitution aside, this is a city of environmental depravity, and throwing away water is just one of its vices.

Las Vegas is wrong in so many other ways, and Davis doesn’t hesitate to expose all of its crimes. The city is poorly planned: it almost completely lacks public commons, and overzealous highway construction is pushing urban sprawl even farther into the desert. The failure to use hazard zoning to restrict development in floodplains “as the best strategy for reducing the social costs of flood” has led to flash-flood problems in

areas that “were best suited for preservation as multi-purpose ‘greenbelts’ and wilderness parks” (Davis 40). An excessive dependence on private automobiles has led to both high expenditures of fossil fuels and a growing problem with air pollution. His list goes on, and Davis seems to have a limitless supply of mud for the slinging. Although his Unfortunately, he spends the majority of his time criticizing Las Vegas without suggesting alternative, and I began to see the city as a lost cause.

Though largely critical, Davis does offer some constructive guidance for the future. He grants that “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, [...] qualities like residential density, pedestrian scale, mass transit, and a wealth of public landscapes” (Davis 41). However, Las Vegas and other cities of the Southwest have failed to meet his standards. These urban areas are everything that a city should not be: sprawling, private, and crawling with cars. In the face of these clear shortcomings, Davis presents “smart” urbanism as an alternative to current inefficiencies. This idea “focuses social ingenuity on problems of resource conservation, fosters more compact and efficient settlement patterns, and generates respect for the native landscape” (Davis 39). Davis leaves this potential compromise between man and nature as a challenge for society.

While Rothman and Davis make convincing cases for and against Las Vegas development, both fail to see the whole picture. On one hand, Rothman presents the economic state of affairs with a refreshing candor, with no attempt to dress up the issue as a moral one. Instead of focusing on Las Vegas’ wastefulness, which he doesn’t deny, he asks “Who is more wasteful, the city or the farmers and ranchers?” The farmers and

ranchers are the clear answer. Trusting rational logic, Rothman depends on the seemingly outwardly practical nature of his argument to win support. Unfortunately, his reasonable voice disguises a glaring lack of foresight. Though water can be purchased and redistributed to sustain Las Vegas' growth, the solution is only temporary. In the longer run, fast-growing cities like Phoenix, Tucson, and San Diego will provide stiff competition for the Southwest's water supply, and there is only so much fresh water to go around.

On the other hand, Davis appeals to our sense of morality as he exposes and condemns the wasteful mismanagement in Las Vegas. Although his argument is lucid and well-founded, his criticisms greatly outweighs the solutions he offers. For Davis, the city is a lost cause. In fact, his underlying belief seems to be that Las Vegas should not exist at all. Everything about the city is wrong; it's an affront to nature and reason. But Las Vegas does exist, and it's here to stay. 1.4 million people are not going to simply pack up and leave when someone wags a disapproving finger at them. By focusing so completely on Las Vegas' negative aspects, Davis only succeeds in making his case more of a complaint than a call for improvement.

Fortunately, Davis rebounds with his final point of urging society to live within its means, to develop cautiously and conserve water in a desert where resources are scarce. His "smart" urbanism should be the goal of all cities, especially those with limited resources. However, his hopes for thoughtful planning and conservation are at present nothing but an ideal. It's not easy to change the habits of so many people, and improvement is sure to be slow and difficult. Interestingly enough, it is Rothman who unwittingly suggests a path to conservation. When he notes that cheap water makes

farmers wasteful, he doesn't mention that Las Vegas' water is also subsidized. Simply raising the price of water for the entire region would make everyone more careful and efficient. His ruthless economics could be turned to protecting the environment just as he uses them to defend the city.

Though it seems that Las Vegas must change, I'm still not sure about the fountains in front of the Bellagio Hotel. They are a clear symbol of extravagance, of excess, of waste. They don't belong there in the desert, spraying precious water into the air to be lost to the sun. But I like them, I like the luxury and glamour, and a part of me wants them to be there the next time I visit Las Vegas. Though I'm not proud to admit it, I don't mind that Las Vegas will be slow to change. I'll have that much more time to secretly enjoy it, excess and all.

### **Works Cited:**

Davis, Mike. "House of Cards." Sierra Nov. 1995. 36-42.

Rothman, Hal. "Urban oasis: cash keeps Las Vegas lush... and it should." Urban Ecology, Spring 2001. 14-18.