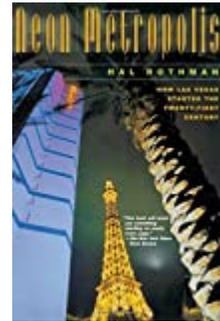




**Hal Rothman.** *Neon Metropolis: How Las Vegas Started the Twenty-First Century.* New York: Routledge, 2003. x + 340 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-92613-3; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-92612-6.



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## Las Vegas: A Tale of Two Cities

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Hal Rothman's *Neon Metropolis* is a colorful and absorbing account of Las Vegas's rise from the desert landscape of the American West to the cutting edge of metropolitan growth and development. Written in a style reminiscent of the works of Jack Kerouac, it tells a story of human ingenuity, creative energy, and wily resourcefulness set within a malleable urbane environment. Like the city itself, this account of Las Vegas was constructed to give the reader a carefully guided tour of the city. The reader is at the center of the story as Rothman deftly points out the sites and sounds of the city and its inhabitants. Without evading the city's notorious reputation for illicit and nefarious underground activity, Rothman moves the reader to another viewpoint from which to consider its incongruous story of phenomenal growth and transition.

Rothman opens his book with a view of the Las Vegas Strip on New Year's Eve 1999, calling attention to the wide array of glitzy, multibillion dollar, world class entertainment facilities represented there. It exemplifies Las Vegas at its best, a unique and ubiquitous blend of

professional leisure and entertainment evocative of times and places worldwide. Rothman then documents the cultural trends and norms of the twentieth century that contributed to Vegas's success. These include technology, consumerism, mobility, a rising post-industrial service economy, the labor movement, the reinterpretation of American values and mores in the 1960s, immigration, the evolution of niche markets (e.g., retirement communities), and the development of a global economy.

The materials of Rothman's book are arranged in three parts, titled "Making Money," "Filling Las Vegas," and "Building a New City." Each of the chapters within these headings covers a particular interlude in the city's multi-textured record. The first chapters introduce the trends that created Las Vegas prior to 1945, including the Union Pacific railroad, the construction of Hoover Dam, the Las Vegas Gunnery School, the Nevada test site, and the arrival of mobsters. With the legalization of gaming in the state, the stage was set for a long and continuing association between wealthy private investors and organized crime. This symbiosis would last until well into the 1970s when changing cultural norms, the Corporate

Gaming Act, and Howard Hughes made legitimate investments in Las Vegas more attractive.

With the steady influx of capital that the hotels and casinos commanded, entertainers created another attraction for the steady stream of tourists coming through the city. The city's growing reputation for professional leisure and corporate entertainment created a never-ending demand for dependable, capable service workers. This, in turn, opened the doors for unionization, a trend that stabilized the cross-generational middle class economy of the city, creating decent wages and workplaces for unskilled workers. The pervasiveness of the union in community life is unique, and is an important factor in the current democratization of a mushrooming immigrant community.

At the physical center of the book is chapter 4, "Freedom and Limits in a City of Pleasure." Rothman returns the reader to the Strip, this time to take a deeper look at the changing values that complicate the communal life of the city. He recounts an on-site interview with a travel network that was thwarted because he did not have a site permit. While previous chapters illustrated the importance of individual freedom in the ethos of Nevadans in general and Las Vegas in particular, this chapter suggests a wrinkle in that definition. If the 1960s extended the boundaries of individual freedom (bringing Las Vegas and its attractions to the center of American culture), later generations established new limits, creating spaces where inhabitants could be free from noxious and undesirable behaviors. That tension is reflected in succeeding chapters of the book, where the more common attributes of urban growth (land development, demography, infrastructure, transportation, plentiful sources of water, pollution, and environmental impacts) are introduced. The dynamics of public and private ownership (and subsequent definitions of the public good) play a compelling role in redefining freedom in the twenty-first century, not only for Las Vegas, but for the country as well.

Part 2, "Filling Las Vegas," extends the main themes of the first part, bringing Las Vegas from the margins of American life slowly to the center. The three chapters in this section examine more closely the changing demographics of the city, focusing on the rising Latino community, the growing numbers of people retiring in Las Vegas, the contributions of the African-American, Jewish, and Mormon communities, and the emergence of a rising professional elite. The influx of people from all over the world, each with particular sets of needs, expectations, and demands, has changed the face of the city, bringing it more and more into conformity with the na-

tional norm.

Part 3, "Building a New City," brings Las Vegas into the present, demonstrating how the city's rampant, exponential growth has raised new and unexpected concerns for the environment; created a demand for regional partnerships for reallocating water; complicated air quality compliance and regulation; created a never-ending demand for more roads and highways, and better access to airports; and fueled a market for unprecedented suburban growth, with emphasis on master plan communities serving niche, upwardly mobile markets. All of these factors have contributed to new patterns of social collaboration, placing more emphasis on loosely formed groups of affinity or common interest than on the traditional neighborhood.

This book makes a solid contribution to the fields of environmental and urban history. Rothman writes from the viewpoint of the insider, which is valuable for those unfamiliar with Las Vegas and its many points of interest. From an outsider's point of view, what is very provocative about this book is the pervasiveness of certain trends in twentieth-century American history. Because the city is located at the far end of the mainstream of American life (its proximity to Southern California would argue the point), its history serves as a long prism, breaking out and differentiating key movements held in common across the nation. It is noteworthy that organized crime, the labor movement, immigration, developing modes of transportation, and the growing presence of federal, state, and local governments played a role in the growth and development of cities nationwide. Understanding that uniformity of experience is crucial to the thoughtful consideration of what to expect in the twenty-first century.

As Rothman suggests, the future may not be about uniformity, but about novel responses to the opportunities and circumstances of the moment. Survival in the next century may depend more on our ability to adapt and evolve unconventional patterns of production, distribution, and integration of resources. Las Vegas capitalized on the strengths of its people, turning even dubious talents into assets contributing to the common good. That resilience became the benchmark of the Las Vegas mystique. It sets the city apart from her peers, and, as Rothman suggests, positions her as a pioneer of the twenty-first century. Whatever the future may bring, it is certain that Western development will play a leading role, outstripping and amalgamating the separate cultures of contiguous states like California and Nevada. That in itself is a strong indicator of upcoming trends in metropolitan management and design.

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