

The Social Health of Nevada

Leading Indicators and Quality of Life in the Silver State

Art and Cultural Participation in Nevada

Robert Tracy, *Department of Art, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

Pablo Picasso once famously observed that “The purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls.” As the second edition of the Social Health of Nevada report suggests, it certainly seems like the “dust of daily life” has descended on the souls of this State’s citizens and a thorough washing is necessary. With the economic collapse at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Nevadans found out very quickly they were neither “protected” nor “immune” from the financial maelstrom that had been unleashed. Having lived in Las Vegas since 1984, I had heard for years that gaming and tourism would “insulate” Nevada from the flux and reflux of the nation’s economic tides. The 2008 “recession” would prove Nevadans wrong concerning the strength and fortitude of their two-dimensional fiscal house.

As it turned out, Nevada’s leadership and power-brokers, whether elected or business driven, did not possess the famous “Philosopher’s Stone.” They did not seem to understand Benjamin Franklin’s dictum of spending less than you get. The doctrine of economic proportion – foreseeing contingencies and providing against them – eluded Nevada’s power brokers. The state legislature, which meets once every two years, has struggled for decades to address the

Chapter Highlights

- According to George Washington, “The Arts and Sciences, essential to the prosperity of the State and to the ornament and happiness of human life, have a primary claim to the encouragement of every lover of his Country and mankind.”
- Billed as the largest privately funded construction project in U.S. history, CityCenter promises to be dazzling mixture of architecture, art, engineering, entertainment and shopping within its 76 acres situated strategically along the famed Las Vegas Strip.
- Designed by Elkus Manfredi Architects, the environmentally sound New City Hall will be a powerful civic statement on sustainability, responsible redevelopment and operational efficiency in the City of Las Vegas.

How to Cite this Report

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proportion and ethical propriety of tax revenue measured against expenditures. And with tax revenues crippled by the 2008 recession, Nevadans faced severe cuts in all aspects of social health. This state's citizens were facing a two headed monster: How do you continue to earn money, thereby generating tax revenues when business models were rapidly changing, and how do you spend those tax monies well?

Historical Overview

From a historical perspective, when this country faced economic challenges in the past, one of the first, if not THE first, area to be examined and assessed for "value" was the arts. Buckling under the weight of fiscal insolvency, Nevada's elected officials and power brokers questioned the contribution of artists, musicians, writers, architects, orchestras, museums, libraries, concert halls, and opera houses to the Silver State's prosperity. Even though the United States was founded in the Age of Enlightenment and fully endorsed its philosophical commitment to "Pursuit of Happiness," whenever a financial belt is tightened, the first area to feel the monetary squeeze has been the arts and culture. Throughout this country's history, two hundred and thirty-six years and counting, its leaders have preferred to measure "the nation's health" by the gross national product and the military might rather by its signature achievements in the area of cultural expression (aka civilization).

Forty-seven years ago, President Lyndon Johnson clarified the opportunity, if not the actual responsibility, of government to help solve impending problems afflicting urban cities. At the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (May 22, 1964), President Johnson invoked in his campus address Richard N. Goodwin's phrase "the Great Society." "We are going to assemble the best thought and broadest knowledge from all over the world to find these answers. I intend to establish working groups to prepare a series of conferences and meetings – on the cities, on natural beauty, on the quality of education, and on other emerging challenges. From these studies, we will begin to set our course toward the Great Society." Congress and the President of the United States endorsed the premise that the ARTS and HUMANITIES are vital to the wellbeing of the Republic. These ideas seem prescient today as we face similar challenges here in Las Vegas.

Those skeptical about President Johnson's concept for a Great Society and President John Kennedy's initiative for a New Frontier that preceded it should be reminded what President George Washington once told Congress: "There is nothing which can better deserve your patronage than the promotion of science and literature. The Arts and Sciences, essential to the prosperity of the State and to the ornament and happiness of human life, have a primary claim to the encouragement of every lover of his Country and mankind." Nearly seventy-five years later, President John Quincy Adams eloquently called for the enactment of laws that would promote "the cultivation and encouragement of the mechanic and of the elegant arts, the advancement of literature, and the progress of the sciences." President Abraham Lincoln, in the bloody third year of the Civil War, ordered the Capitol dome to be finished. Responding to vitriolic critics who

objected vociferously to the diversion of monies for a construction project, Lincoln had the foresight and vision to assert: “If people see the Capitol going on, it is a sign that we intend this Union shall go on.”

Delivered some 148 years ago, President Lincoln’s remark struck at the very heart of the argument when he described the diversion of monies to finish the Capitol dome as a “sign.” A “sign” of what, you may ask? Our Founding Fathers, as well as many of our political leaders over the course of this Republic’s history, recognized that a great nation’s character and achievement are measured not solely by the size of its gross national product or its military arsenal but by the civilization it engenders.

While public financing provides much needed incentives to the art scene development, we need to bear in mind that governments do not create civilization. The government’s ability to spawn the vibrant arts and culture is limited indeed. And as far as Nevada is concerned, what is missing here, especially in times of economic crisis, is not just investments from agencies like Nevada Arts Council but participation by the citizens inhabiting the 36th State of the Union. Bill Russell, the famed collegiate, Olympic and professional basketball player, once remarked: “The opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference.” A similar connection can be drawn between economy and funding the arts: The opposite of funding the arts is not slashing the budget – it is indifference and apathy.

The Recession and the Nevada Arts Scene

The 2008 recession dealt a blow the Nevada cultural arts scene. Access to government funds has been severely restricted and in many cases eliminated, rendering public financing of Arts practically irrelevant. Nevertheless, the cultural arts scene in Northern and Southern Nevada is alive, though by no means well, compared to other States of the Union. In Northern Nevada, the gallery exhibitions could be found in a number of venues:

- Nevada Museum of Art
- ACR (Artists Co-Op Gallery)
- Stremmel Gallery
- Sierra Nevada Arts Alliance
- UNR (University of Nevada, Reno)

In Southern Nevada, Las Vegas’ creative classes were attracted to the following art venues:

- The Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art
- The Donna Beam Fine Art Gallery (UNLV)
- Performing Arts Center (UNLV)
- First Friday events/openings
- Clark County Library Art Galleries

- S2 Art Group, Arts District, Contemporary Arts Center
- G-C Arts
- Left of Center Art Gallery and Studio
- Brett Wesley Gallery
- Southern Nevada Museum of Fine Art and the Arts Factory

In addition to these big art venues, Southern Nevada houses a number of smaller, regionally active outlets:

- The Atomic Testing Museum
- The Howard W. Cannon Aviation Museum
- Marjorie Barrick Museum
- Nevada State Museum
- Neonopolis
- Historical Society
- The Mob Museum
- Smith Center
- The Imperial Palace Auto Collection Museum

These entities share the common ethos that placed emphasis on creativity in the face of political indifference. The creative classes' investment in "plug and play" districts is helping Southern Nevadans cope with the current financial storm. These venues are weathering the economic downturn because, unlike many of Nevada's elected officials and their power brokers, their leadership knows their audience's expectations. And this enlightened leadership is proving to be an important catalyst for change.

The Place of Arts in Reinventing Las Vegas

The indifferent attitude towards arts funding on the part of elected officials and power brokers has actually created private pockets of endeavors. Rising from a state-wide indifference to the arts, a sequence of new starting points epitomizes both the depth and breadth of cultural expression in Southern Nevada. These initiatives portend a significant reinvention of Las Vegas as a cultural destination for Americans and international visitors alike. Perceptions of Las Vegas are changing, yet again! The earlier perception of a metropolis exhibiting an over-the-top extravagance is giving way to a more formal elegance and understatement. Reminiscent of Akin to Christopher Alexander's "so too a city needs its dreams," this redefinition of Las Vegas may take two decades to run its cycle, but the key markers are visible already. The Las Vegas' artistic elites are thumbing their noses at the political indifference toward culture and forging ahead recreate a sense of community by bringing people to places of added value, places where character, identity, pride in one's neighborhoods, and image enhancement merge to make Las Vegas a city to live, work and visit.

A curious dialectic has been brewing in Las Vegas, over the course of many years now, evident in an eight-story building that is rising atop a sturdy foundation. Bounded by First and Main Streets and Lewis and Clark Avenues, this 308,990 square foot structure has been generating heated arguments not only about its right to exist but about the very context of Las Vegas as a 21st century urban center. Many opponents question the need to expend upwards of \$200 million for a newer City Hall. Others challenge such thinking, even in the midst of an economic recession, pointing out the benefits of improving public services which have become nearly impossible to administer in a 38 year old City Hall hobbled by budget woes. As proponents of the New City Hall point out, Las Vegas' leaders are committed to building a government edifice that is "green," socially responsible, and environmentally sound.

The famed Boston firm of Elkus Manfredi Architects has been acting as the chief design consultant for this facility and collaborating locally with the executive architecture firm JMA. The result of this design partnership will be a Las Vegas City Hall that not only makes a statement about prevailing beliefs and values but also projects a long-term vision. Is such an offering really the domain of government? This question strikes at the heart of the problem facing Las Vegas residents, and as the above-mentioned statements by Washington, Lincoln and Jonson suggest, the answer to this question for many of us in the profession is a resounding yes!

The intersection of First and Main Streets and Lewis and Clark Avenues had become an unsightly and desolate area as one got closer to the historic downtown corridor that is Las Vegas. The forty-six year old Queen of Hearts Hotel, formerly located at 19 East Lewis Avenue, had been abandoned since 2007. Urban blight, seen in nearly every direction from this area of downtown Las Vegas, has dragged neighborhoods such as this one down like a rusting anchor, inhibiting efforts to promote economic or cultural growth. Why should anyone promote development in an area evincing the air of doomsday? You confront such blight and the stale thinking that gave rise to it with insightful re-use of the land exemplified by the collaborative work of architecture firms like Elkus Manfredi Architects and JMA.

What can we expect from a structure whose mass will exceed 300,000 square feet in such a depressed area? The reflective skin of the steel and glass City Hall building will showcase the latest advances in sustainable building technology. A sequence of shade fins will create a transformative façade programmed with light-emitting diodes (LED) that speak of Las Vegas' sustained fascination with light, color and symbolic references to water and to Hoover Dam. Mounted on the roof will be 7,000 square feet of photovoltaic panels capturing energy from the sun. A 40,000 square foot plaza, facing Clark Street, will feature 33-solar trees providing additional photovoltaic electricity. Besides generation of electricity that promises to save the City of Las Vegas over half a million dollars annually and reduce its carbon footprint by 2400 metric tons, these shade trees can act as awnings for the comfort of pedestrians who will find themselves

encouraged to linger and enjoy a welcoming open space – a decidedly “new” concept for Las Vegas’ urban downtown.

The proposed civic building, it should be stressed, cannot fit comfortably with the surrounding neighborhood in its present form. But that is a good sign! The design team of Elkus Manfredi Architects and JMA offer us, in their vision of a City Hall, an opportunity to define a deeper and more thoughtful meaning for what we want our city to be. Las Vegas’ New City Hall is a powerful civic statement on sustainability, responsible redevelopment and operational efficiency. In a short period of time, this new civic structure will demonstrate how much of a game-changer such a development could be for the historic downtown core.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the former professor of Humanities at the City University of New York, underscored the benefits city dwellers derive from collaboration between government and local entities on projects such as Las Vegas’ New City Hall. While talking to members of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in New York City, Schlesinger quoted the famed 19th century English critic John Ruskin: “Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts – the book of their deeds, the book of their word and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others; but of the three the only quite trustworthy one is the last. The acts of a nation may be triumphant by its good fortune; and its words mighty by the genius of a few of its children; but its art only by the general gifts and common sympathies of the race.”

Vito Acconci, the New York & Brooklyn-based designer/landscape architect, performance and installation artist, yearns for the total assimilation and absorption of art into the everyday fabric of life within the urban environment. Acconci does not separate Architecture, Art, Dance, Film, Literature, Music and Theatre into separate arenas. All of these creative entities utilize spaces that accentuate commonalities of process rather than hard edges of distinction. For Acconci, studios projects overlap one another, and those overlaps offer some of life’s greatest insights. Or as he put it, “I look forward to a time when art might be considered not as a separable category, in its own arena and with its own products, but as an atmosphere instilled, almost secretly, within other categories of life.”

One and Done

In December 2009, MGM Resorts International corporate leaders unveiled their newest vision of Las Vegas. Promoted as the largest privately funded construction project in U.S. history, CityCenter promised a dazzling mixture of architecture, art, engineering, entertainment and shopping within its 76 acres situated strategically along the famed Strip (aka Las Vegas Boulevard). Of particular interest in the MGM Resorts International plans for CityCenter is the polyphonic interchange among the architects designing the complex’s intricate structures.

The aesthetic designs behind CityCenter showcase the centrality of the building sciences in the modern world. CityCenter's architects – Foster + Partners (Harmon Towers), Helmut Jahn (Veer Towers), Kohn Pedersen Fox (Mandarin Oriental), Pelli Clark Pelli (Aria), RV Architects (Vdara), Studio Daniel Libeskind (Entertainment District) – bridge the design/build discipline's separation of studios by drawing together the complex dialectic of the building sciences and art. By translating CityCenter into visible form, these world-class architects and MG Resorts International effectively interface science and art. The final outcome is not just a beautiful ensemble of buildings amid lush landscaping but an eye-opening acknowledgment that the building sciences and art are working together to realize a common dream. Since the dawning of the Industrial Revolution, science has led and often determined much of our destiny.

Alas, the effective synthesis of human senses has not been less than compelling in our modern times. Questionable decision making, effectively cloaked and disguised in the construction industry's term "value engineering", has impacted CityCenter in a way that should never have been. Anxiety and dread accompany Foster + Partners Harmon Towers. The gift of Sir Norman Foster's design was undercut unceremoniously by greed.

Knock knock
Who's there?
Justice!
Justice who?
Justice as I thought, no one home!

Picture a seventy-six acre site occupying one of the most visible and expensive commercial sites to be found anywhere in the industrialized urban environment. On this plot of land an enclave of noted designers enclosed 16,197,800 square feet in seven buildings with each structure conceived and developed by an entourage of carefully selected "starchitects." These very gifted urban visionaries were provided a design/build budget of estimated \$9.2 billion dollars. They were also given a respected executive architecture firm to handle the daunting task of leading the preeminent design/build project from initial conception to finished product. The starting point was identifying a short list of design professionals to work together as a team on a massive project the likes of which had not been seen in the United States since Rockefeller Center was built over a half century ago. The impressive collection of design/build practitioners possessed the right amount of antagonism to be healthy in the demanding studio matrix of design and to portend the creation of an urban enclave whose shadow would re-define the city's already iconic skyline for decades to come.

Looking back on the design/build process, the "starchitects" worked together with purpose and vision. Each individual architect and their respective structure survived the myriad requests for cutting costs, reworking design concepts, and numerous change orders were implemented as functions evolved. In short, all

the aesthetic choices were magically fixed into visible form on paper to meet and exceed the client's magnificent vision. For these "starchitects," their personal investment in this project survived every conceivable fact checking from creative vision to structural feasibility. Fact checking goes part and parcel with the studio process, hovering above your favorite schemes due to the all-consuming driver called the economic bottom line. But in this particular case, the collective voices of the design side were heard loud and clear in all but one building. The problem, it seems, was rooted in the voracious appetite of the build phase environment for the Harmon Hotel and Spa. Although far less visible than a structure's exterior or interior design details, the calculated emphasis on the structural "bottom line" reared its ugly head in the disguise of value engineering.

The basic foundation upon which value engineering resides is the belief that the "value" of an architect's design will be improved by assessing the ratio of function to cost. Critical for determining areas for value engineering is the calculation ensuring that basic functions are preserved and not reduced or compromised as a consequence of value improvements. Unfortunately, we are talking about a project developed in Nevada, a state notoriously short of heroes. The failure of this component in the case of the larger Harmon Hotel and Spa design/build scheme will have repercussions on Nevada's reputation within the architecture profession for decades.

The Harmon Hotel and Spa was conceived as a boutique hotel sited on the northwest corner of the CityCenter property and placed as close to the famed "Strip" as building codes would allow. Designed by world-renowned British modernist architect Sir Norman Foster, the Harmon was conceived as a 49-stories building. Foster + Partners has long been recognized for the firm's interpretation of thought-provoking modernity, its designs underpinned by exceptional materials research, close working relationships with structural engineers, and persistent cultivation of professionals in disciplines outside of architecture. Such a working philosophy has ensured that Foster + Partners continue to maintain its cutting edge. This esteemed firm consistently balances aesthetic choices with beautifully engineered, intelligent and efficient structures. MGM Mirage's corporate leadership was confident that Lord Foster would deliver a facility that would provide luxurious services and amenities in a technologically advanced structure. CityCenter CEO Bobby Baldwin told the LVRJ: "The Harmon has become the poster child for nonconforming work worldwide."

As the steel frame for the Harmon Hotel and Spa reached the fifteenth floor, inspectors discovered that every floor had serious construction flaws. The weaving of steel beams with rebar and concrete was insufficient for a building designed by Sir Norman Foster to be 49 stories tall. Three solutions were presented to MGM Mirage officials to resolve this value engineering error: (1) dramatically enlarge each steel column to bear the full 49-story height of the Harmon; (2) downsize the building from 49 to 28-stories; (3) implode the existing skeletal frame and start over. MGM Mirage leadership chose to top off the building at 28-stories. They formally asked Sir Norman Foster to re-design

his elegant elliptical curve downward to accommodate the new reduction in size. Foster turned down the request for a change-order, removing the project and all associations with Las Vegas from his website. And, to add insult to injury, Foster was a no-show for the December 16, 2009 formal celebration as CityCenter came on-line.

Within the professional field we read and hear some fading criticism and protest associated with the Harmon disaster. David Schwarz, a noted Washington, D.C. based architect selected to design the Smith Center for the Performing Arts, stated: "I've never heard of a building being cut in half before." Brian Andrews, a visiting professor in Architecture at UNLV, added the following criticism: "To bring him (Foster) in and say 'Okay, design this tower.' And he designs it with a certain proportional system, and then to cut it in half – it's a disaster. And it sends a very bad message to other architects about Las Vegas. I'm just worried that other architects are going to say, 'I'm not going to work in Vegas – look what they did to Foster.'"

Today the Harmon functions as a 28-story billboard advertising Elvis. But the great curtain is about to fall as MGM Resorts International is asking Clark County government offices for a demolition permit to bring down the Harmon Hotel and Spa. This particular request is unique because the structure is "evidence" in a continuing legal battle between the owners and contractors. Once the litigants have completed their litigation and the judge has identified the guilty parties and assessed penalties, Las Vegas will go through another implosion, a new darkness will descend upon Las Vegas' already reeling design/build reputation. When CityCenter opened in the late Fall of 2009, the lights were on at the Harmon but nobody was home. Nothing has changed in the last several years, but sometime during the summer of 2013 visitors and residents of Las Vegas are likely witness a spectacle that will relegate the Harmon Hotel and Spa to a memory.

Still, we should not overlook Nevada's successes. Worst-case scenarios don't always happen. Art doesn't get made or created in a vacuum. And art cannot exist or survive in a vacuum either. As we pull our gaze back from the CityCenter precipice, an interesting vision of Las Vegas comes into view.

The Clustered Spires of Vegas Stand

A heroic narrative plays itself out along the I-95 freeway south from Tropicana to Horizon Drive in Henderson and back to Tropicana. As I make this trek on the southbound journey, I witness a pitched battle of motorized machines, big and small, scurrying for positioning and space within the narrow boundaries of I-95's high-speed corridors. The northbound journey, on the other hand, is an elegy where the visual language of modernism plays itself out with power and rectitude.

During the first stretch of this movement from Tropicana to Horizon Drive, nothing of genuine aesthetic value seems to exist outside the protective capsule that is my automobile. My eyes fervently scan the urban environment searching

for memorable vistas to entrance my gaze but, alas, all I see is a recurring void; mile upon mile of empty reference points overwhelm my senses and I return to my necessary preoccupation with jockeying for time, space and position in the kinetic world of freeway driving.

The northbound return fills me with wonder as I recognize clustered works of imaginative vitality. With Black Mountain receding into the background, powerful expressions of ebullience, idealism, and confidence are manifested in towering forms of immense capital investment. As the car hurls me into the expansive Las Vegas valley, my gaze discerns clusters of building activity that form three master-images of post-WWII capitalist dynamism.

Fifty years of sustained development may be seen in these clustered packages of steel and glass challenging the horizon's backdrop of undulating mountains. The "first" cluster would be historic downtown Las Vegas from the Fremont Street Experience southward to the World Market Center. The next grouping is a sequence of buildings that embrace the Stratosphere all the way to the massive hulk of the unfinished Fontainebleau. The third and most compelling arrangements of buildings encapsulate themselves around Steve Wynn's Encore to Mandalay Bay at the extreme southern boundary. This third cluster really tugs at my sleeves as my gaze bounces back and forth between the variegated architectural languages of New York New York, the metaphoric linkage of the Luxor hearkening back to ancient times, the interconnectedness of rounded cylinders forming the edges of Excalibur, and the marvelous convention of refined sensibilities that CityCentre, the Cosmopolitan, the Wynn and Encore epitomize.

These three pockets of urban infrastructure speak of the human discourse that drove Las Vegas to its present posture within the contemporary fabric of the 21st century. The famed Las Vegas Strip, that long studied and examined celebration of the automobile, continues its service as the biggest and most dominating presence constructing and construing the meaning of motorized life here in the desert Southwest. These clusters possess a mythic potency celebrating the American fascination with "the new." The army of architects responsible for the design ebullience along Las Vegas Boulevard effectively structured their creative commentary from one era to another and, as a consequence, changed the way our city may be valued and appreciated by the random gaze...from a distance...and at high speed or velocity.

This particular perspective unfolding along the I-95 corridor northbound from Horizon Drive toward Tropicana generalizes experience, schematizes what and how one can see. Looking through the horizontal plane of my SUV's windshield, somewhat elevated above the mass of vehicles vying for position in my spatial corridor, I am drawn to the structural unity of effect and balance between the clustered spires of Las Vegas' skyline and the meanderings of I-95. Even though my eyes take in the unfolding panorama of steel and glass skyscrapers, nevertheless, my gaze is nothing more than a sequence of flickers from side to

side. And yet, within this fractional shifting of eye position, I am able to see random extracts of reference points that speak to me of a cultural heritage for which I am grateful.

The architects behind these design efforts imbedded in their clustered towers a mosaic of multiple relationships that oscillate back and forth in time and space. And, as I move through this high-speed corridor glancing toward the West, my gaze celebrates the architect's vaunted efforts. Turning my vision repeatedly between the roadway and the distant panorama, I perceive numerous opportunities for experiential glimpses...and those glimpses, locked as they are in a kind of heroic modernist imagery, always succeed in aiding my arrival back home with the culmination of a positive visual narrative.