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Postcard from ... Las Vegas

By Edwin Heathcote

The Smith Center is an attempt to create a genuinely public place for residents rather than visiting gamblers



The art deco Smith Center, Las Vegas

“For the grand debut of Monte Carlo as a resort in 1879, the architect Charles Garnier designed an opera house for the Place du Casino,” wrote Tom Wolfe in *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965). “For the debut of Las Vegas as a resort in 1946, Bugsy Siegel hired Abbott and Costello, and there, in a way, you have it all.” As Wolfe implies, the architecture of Las Vegas was never top of the bill, even if its signage and neons always were.

Downtown Vegas, which emerged as a rail hub in the 1900s, was built on a curious combination of money from Mormons, the Mob, and workers constructing the nearby Hoover Dam, on (legal) gaming and on the proximity of the Nellis air force base and atomic testing in the 1950s (some casinos offered guests “atomic viewing breakfasts”).

As the city expanded traffic started arriving from Los Angeles. The Mob, always on the lookout for an angle, started building resorts along Highway 61 from LA to catch visitors before they got downtown. Bugsy Siegel's Flamingo (1946) was followed by the Desert Inn and others. The new casinos were conceived as self-contained resorts, places with everything you'd ever need – so you'd never have to leave, or stop gambling. The casinos on the Strip got bigger, brasher and more outrageous and their bright lights drowned out the fading 1950s neons of downtown just as their spiralling revenues choked off its money supply. The city's founding gangsters are, incidentally, commemorated in the new Mob Museum downtown, which opened in an old courthouse in February.

This centrifugal development has left downtown Vegas as a sorry, ragged grid, a single street surrounded by a low-lying landscape of bail bonds offices and pawnshops. Vegas's big bucks never actually make it to Vegas at all – the Strip is outside the official city limits, in unincorporated land in Clark County.

So in the mid-1990s the city authorities drew up plans to revitalise downtown with a 61-acre, mixed-use development called Symphony Park, built on the site of former railway sidings. But with development delayed by the credit crunch, the Smith Center, the \$245m cultural complex intended to become the heart of the new downtown, opened last month standing on the edge of a dusty plot.

The lonely building has been given civic presence and the scale to suggest a new city centre through the construction of a campanile and a pair of curving corners that channel visitors in to a palm and cypress-shaded courtyard. Vegas casinos have spent so much money and effort on creating miniature versions of the most urban places on earth – Venice, Rome, New York, Paris – yet have completely failed to build a single thing resembling a piece of real city. The Smith Center is exactly that missing element, a glimpse of genuine urbanity. It is not, however, entirely unthemed – it is executed in impeccable Jazz Age art deco.

David M Schwarz, its architect, argues that deco is the city's default style, the style of the 1930s buildings beneath the neons and of the Hoover Dam. It's interesting that in the wake of the phenomenal success of a film such as *The Artist*, as pure a pastiche as it is possible to get, no critic has chided the director for using a historicist technique. Yet, in architecture, the merest whiff of a revival creates a murmur. Is that confidence in the absolute rightness of contemporaneity – or is it insecurity?

Either way, the Smith Center is an enjoyably complex work. The densely decorated corner draws the visitor in to a grand staircase which is more operatic than filmic, closer to Wolfe's Monte Carlo than Wynn's Vegas. Every detail, from the light fittings to the hand rails, sparkles. The 2,050 seat Reynolds Hall (which will be the home of the Las Vegas

Philharmonic) is luxurious and comfortable. A traditional proscenium arch hall, it will accommodate music from orchestral to pop. The detailing is deep deco. From the moveable rear and side stage walls to the filigree grilles, every surface and junction twinkles with a rich, sparkly geometric complexity.

There is a warren of rooms for entertaining surrounding the theatre, each wrapped in warm timber and elegantly bespoke furniture. In the neighbouring Bowman Pavilion, a matching curved façade leads into a slimmer lobby, cabaret theatre and hall. Another building on the site houses a children's museum, still under construction behind a chunky romanescque arch. The ensemble is solid and civic, capable of bearing the burden of becoming a centre to a town that doesn't yet exist. Its tapering deco tower is intended to bring music into the public realm with a carillon of 47 bells.

Las Vegas is a city of private spaces which are opened up to entice visitors to gamble. It looks inward, projecting only signage on to a barely functional street. The Smith Center is an attempt to create a genuinely public place for residents rather than visiting gamblers, using an effort, imagination and craftsmanship usually only employed to construct the city's extravagant spaces of consumption.

www.thesmithcenter.com

Edwin Heathcote is the FT's architecture critic

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