LEAH MEISTERLIN –

Antipublic Urbanism: Las Vegas and the Downtown Project

In the summer of 2013, I did what many would not attempt in the heat of July: I went to Las Vegas. I had a handful of overlapping reasons to be there, and among those was seeing the work and progress of Tony Hsieh’s Downtown Project (DTP). [1] [2] Like so many urbanists, I had heard of the plans, the intentions, the investment budget, the vision and its visionary, the ambition. I saw the container park under construction. [3] I walked the perimeter of 9th Bridge—a private early education and elementary school “now enrolling entrepreneurs and creators”—and thought about the building’s restoration and DTP’s investment in both private and public education. [4] I walked the length of Fremont Street, comparing and contrasting it to the Strip, to the acres of sprawl surrounding Vegas, and to every mixed-use, walkable, “vibrant” downtown revitalization plan I had seen before.

When night came, I had a couple of drinks at a couple of bars. I left Vegas uneasy, unsettled, and uncertain.

I am rarely unsure about a place so seemingly defined and self-assured in its image. I am just as much the project’s target demographic as I am sensitive to urban marketing schemes. My visit should have held interest as a critical exercise and maybe even a little fun. Instead, I found a downtown almost impossible to engage for the uninitiated outsider. [5] My clearest read of downtown Las Vegas was that it seems sure about how it seems. To be clear, skepticism was not my reaction. I was nervous.

Three years into the endeavor, the project’s unfolding story has recently prompted a line of questions and interrogations into how DTP seems and into the nature of both its assurances and surety. [6] [7] As a result, what follows is not a review of the architectural projects now freckling downtown Las Vegas nor of the plans for additional density, housing, retail, or even technology-related start-up activity. Instead, I’ll meander and machete a way through the project as an enacted proposal and prototype for a general form of urbanism in search of the kind of city-making now active along Hsieh’s Fremont and its immediate environs. [8] It’s a haphazard and necessarily belligerent path. There can be no clarity, elegance, or subtlety in mapping a funhouse—tracing processes that are more “Vegas” than “downtown,” more signifier than substance, more affect than effect, more wizard than Oz.

Along the way, I’ll infer an urban-planning approach about which I cannot be sure by its own strategic design. Hacking through crafted public statements and a short catalog of awestruck dispatches from the desert, I arrive at in-
dictments, more nervous than before. This breed of urbanism is an anti-public version of social space requiring only the semblance of city-ness for its sustaining. The image of the Downtown Project, as it is and as it seems, is the logical end of privatized planning ad absurdum drawn as a diagram of hubris over a fading erasure of civic responsibility.

The Project That Is and Isn’t

The Downtown Project both is and is not many things. It can be simultaneously analyzed through several separate and often contradictory urban reinvestment models and frameworks, each describing a considerably different set of circumstances within which downtown Las Vegas is currently developing.

For starters DTP is generally described as a tech-oriented utopia “where every aspect of life is geared toward entrepreneurship and innovation.” [9] Beyond a mere “tech hub,” Hsieh and DTP are “building an entirely new community—even, in a sense, a new city.” [10] But while it may be “the most ambitious experiment in building a twenty-first century utopian city in the U.S.,” it is noticeably and surprisingly devoid of technological infrastructure investment. [11][12][13] Its inhabitants are twenty-first-century entrepreneurs and certainly many of the startups and young businesses receiving investment are tech-focused, but the project’s dominant planning approaches (manipulations of land use and density, strategic investment in the existing built environment for economic development, and so on) are decidedly twentieth-century techniques. [14] The envisioned “new city” is not designed around the deployment of urban apps, sensors, or similarly “connected” technologies. It seems that the “Great American Techtopia” is not designed around the deployment of urban apps, sensors, or similarly “connected” technologies. It seems that the “Great American Techtopia” is a city without significant additional technological facilitation.

Perhaps the project may be more appropriately described as a “utopia for techies” and thus operate in terms of creative-class-oriented planning. Within this framework, the members of the creative class act as a local economic generator, and urban development and investment strategies are designed to attract members of this “class.” If you build it, they will come; they will come, and the city will prosper. The Vegas Tech Fund describes its methodology in terms of “increas[ing] the creative class of

[6] In late September, DTP “eliminated 30 positions from [its] corporate staff.” The layoffs and a series of misreportings (many sources claimed that the project was eliminating 30 percent of its staff) led to a level of scrutiny new to the public discussion on the project to date. The layoffs were preceded by an open letter by David Gould to Tony Hsieh in which he tendered his resignation with charges of “decadence, greed, and missing leadership.” In response to much of the misreporting, Tony Hsieh released a clarifying statement (with unabashed defensive sarcasm, its title begins “tl;dr”—Internet shorthand for “too long; didn’t read”) via the DTP website.


[8] Here, “urbanism” is understood as the set of social, political, and spatial practices and processes unique to cities.


[13] This is the first of many references to large-scale planning initiatives usually, but not always, undertaken by the public sector. The distinction between governmental and private investment and agenda-setting is an important and underlying theme here, but a full discussion is sadly beyond the scope of this essay. For our purposes, it is necessary to note that DTP’s stated interest in addressing city-wide systemic issues was ambitiously high in 2012 and has since fluctuated. (cf, Notes 21 and 23.)
downtown Las Vegas,” and unsurprisingly DTP has suffered many of the same criticisms weathered by creative class theorist Richard Florida. [15] Primary among them is the argument that development marginalizes less advantaged, less “creative” populations. [16] But DTP’s interventions are not designed linearly to create the urban conditions that attract creative professionals. Rather, the project is an inversion of the creative class model’s causal relationships placing chosen creative professionals within the landscape to help create those certain urban conditions.

The project can just as easily be discussed in New Urbanist terms—instigated by reverse-engineered density goals given the requirements of an urban typology. [17] Further, it is predicated on a walkable, mixed-use streetscape (the Main Street model) as well as an aesthetic approach calibrating historical reference to cultural association, capitalizing on local architectural allusion balanced with a romanticized lifestyle expectation. Yet the New Urbanist characterization also holds only so far. The project is effectively hermetic—certainly not conceived relative to its place along a settlement transect. The plans do not connect to or transition from the suburbs, the Strip, or the desert. Nor does it follow a particularly prescriptive or principled approach to the formal matters of urban design.

The same binary exercise can be executed for a number of other urbanistic methods. Briefly, a few more: DTP both is and is not producing a company town with Zappos at its core. Or, perhaps less anachronistically, it is a distributed corporate campus whose very distribution requires description as something other than a campus. The project is and is not an updated Urban Renewal brainchild of a Robert Moses-like power broker. Beyond strictly built-environment models, it both is and is not a city-scaled business incubator. It is and is not a venture capital (VC) firm, a community development corporation (CDC), and/or a VC-CDC mutant hybrid, a simultaneous business plan and urban plan. [18] [19] While the CDC interpretation of the project could help make sense of Hsieh’s previous rhetorical replacement of ROI (return on investment) with ROC (return on community), the sheer notion of the more likely hybrid warrants additional attention below as its image seems nothing short of a terrifying griffin haunting the daydreams of every social justice advocate in America. [20] [21] From the outside, the project is puzzlingly contrary to the binaries of our popular urban thinking. Call it Schrödinger Urbanism: Fremont is simultaneously Wall Street and Main Street.

In truth, the Downtown Project is not generating an urbanism relegated to an analytical “either/or—both/neither” limbo, because it should not be analyzed by the status of the cat, but by the establishment of the thought experiment’s fundamental premise: the box. It is defined by the barrier that prevents one from witnessing the process by which the outcome is determined, and the practices by which the space of the city is constructed and transformed. Each of the urban tactics described above is defined by its methodologies regardless of the success or failure of the result. Urbanism is not defined by its ends, but by its means. [22] Las Vegas’ downtown brand of urbanism is not public. [23] As such, it engages none of the distinctly urban issues resulting from the city’s essential publicness, from the negotiations of difference and competing needs, and from a spatial realpolitik.
The urban space as conceived will never, for example, encounter the tragedy of the commons—it lacks meaningfully shared space with shared responsibility. It is not open and has no need for the messiness of democratic decision-making. It has replaced the public with massified social self-similarity, hindered effective diversity on a crusade for a singular like-minded community, and substituted experiential richness for “happiness” without conflict. [24] Cities are pluralistic, comprised of multiple publics and multiple communities. The Downtown Project’s utopia is not a city; it’s an enclave.

The Urban Pioneer

The early vision for downtown Vegas was not only utopian in its description. It was universal and lofty. Back then, Hsieh described the global challenges of urbanization and posited that “if you fix cities, you kind of fix the world.” [25] His proposals for downtown Vegas were presented as strategic with each intervention contributing to the holistic and integrated revitalization of a city. With this vision of the city he could create, Hsieh headed into the frontier and settled, beginning with the (literal and figurative) Zappos relocation into what was once City Hall.

The image of the pioneer—fearlessly heading into the untamed and unknown, armed with decision if not experience—is a significant component of the DTP ethos. After all, these are entrepreneurial techie types. They may not know what they are doing, but they are sure they can figure it out. This group of “novice urban planners cheerfully concede they have no experience doing what they’re doing. They’re simply mapping what they do know—how to build technology companies—onto urban development.”[26] [27] Zach Ware, for example, has described their methods as “kind of hacky.”[28] It is a point of pride: It is the pioneers who take the greatest risks, do the work to learn as they go, and reap the greatest reward. “It’s the trailblazers who move West.” [29]

The image of the trailblazing pioneer is revealing and allows for a brief restating of a few key points often mentioned about the project: gentrification, risk, leadership, zeal, and dissent. First, the DTP decision makers, from Tony Hsieh downward, almost perfectly exemplify the gentrifying pioneers posited by Neil Smith three decades ago, from the frontiersman attitude of the early settlers to the prerequisite debasement of the existing territory and its inhabitants as wild, uncivilized, and in need of outsiders’ culture. [30] [31] Smith was writing on inner-city gentrification practices observed from the 1960s into the ‘80s, and while the imposed culture is different, the arrogance and condescension suggest that these “novice urban planners” could have benefitted greatly from examining those who have previously attempted similar “fixes.” This history is too recent to have been forgotten so quickly.

Smith’s analysis goes on to describe the redifferentiation of urban space by capital through this gentrifying practice. When viewed through this lens, the pioneering adventure fantasy rhetoric falls apart, and DTP’s projected image seems nothing more than the result of a well-financed Peter Pan Syndrome, a crafted delusion of innocence, and a childish game of “Cowboys and Indians” played out in public with real experiences of con-
quest and casualty. DTP is not an organization of pioneers, and Hsieh is no cowboy. At best, they are the analogy’s railroad magnates facilitating the expansion of the edge into the frontier from the less risky comfort of their offices. More appropriately, however, they are the banks and insurance companies underwriting the endeavor. The monetary investment is great but their gamble pales in comparison to that of the pioneers wagering material and human bets on the outcome. His risk-to-reward ratio is solidly calculated, and Tony Hsieh’s investment strategy is neither particularly visionary nor utopian. It is only the latest incarnation of a longer history in urbanism: the financialization of space and of others’ risk within that space.

Third, whether DTP is simplified as pioneer or banker, this gentrification-settlement model only succeeds if others follow. Fiercely loyal and devoted, Hsieh’s band of followers—comprised of friends, colleagues, employees, supporters, and collaborators—are repeatedly and unfailingly described as a cult. [32] [33] Yet Tony Hsieh is not only reluctant to lead, he seems to outright refuse the responsibility when publicly pressed. Instead, Hsieh and the DTP leadership have authorized themselves to make decisions with influence over the whole of a city while declining the accountability concomitant with such authority. [34] In the context of an urban strategy dependent on the many who have migrated to Vegas, this lacking leadership points to a sinister application of holacracy onto the city. [35] Holacratic structures are designed to maximize the rate of innovation by maximizing experimentation unencumbered by the fear of failure or its consequences. In an urban setting, this amounts to an irresponsible disregard for the public effects of possible failures as well as the inevitable negative externalities generated even by possible successes.

The existence of a cult following should not suggest that there are no voices of dissent in downtown Las Vegas. Until very recently, most of these dissenting voices have come from locals rather than those who moved to Las Vegas to be part of the downtown revitalization, whether receiving direct investment or not. Some are weary of the leadership’s inexperience. Many feel pushed aside or out, discarded by gentrification. Several fear the repercussions of criticizing the project openly, and very few have exercised their voice along with their name. Others are uncomfortable with the city’s reliance on one man’s decision to continue his investment. Upon hearing,
secondhand, that Hsieh is committed to Las Vegas for the long term, one developer commented, “That’s nice to know. But maybe you’re the only one who knows that. We don’t know a thing about what’s going on.” [36] This is the palpable and precarious uncertainty produced by Schrödinger’s box, of urbanism by private dictate. Walking along Fremont, I felt no active excitement, spontaneity, or curiosity, but rather the growth of a scripted narrative and a correspondingly enforced restraint. [37] Even superficially, the developing streetscape’s lively mixture of land use and style—call it, maybe, the “Millennial Serendipitous Aesthetic”—betray a defiantly unmixed agenda for a similarly unmixed audience of users. Unable to inspire confidence in investors outside his circle or empower voices that are not his own, Hsieh’s project cannot lead to a self-sustaining city.

For now, however, the project is not threatened by its relative quiet dissent, and despite recent public setbacks and tragedies, DTP’s work is moving along at a rate far faster than most cities might want to see change. This pace, like the rest of the process, is a product of its visionary’s developing culture. [38] Consider Nellie Bowles’ description: “The startup movement is isolationist and idealistic, with a sense that entrepreneurs can build their own, better communities; that founders need to be in a conducive, unfettered environment to innovate; and, most of all, that progress is achievable only by dramatic disruption rather than incremental change. Taken to its logical conclusion, this means building entirely new cities.” [39]

We know this story. We know the story of an isolationist, individualist, and entrepreneurial movement with a persuasive, and somewhat reluctant, leader attracting talent from various places to an unregulated environment somewhere out West. We have all read it or heard it: The fictional story hypothesizing massively disruptive and intentional change and the building of one new city before a new society, so as to “fix the world.” That novel’s pioneer settlement is a prototype, enclave, and refuge, until the day its community members decide they can return to the world. But Las Vegas is not fictional, and the complications of public urbanism are both real and undeniable. Soon, I think, the Downtown Project will need to consider openness, integration, and perhaps even a nondigital relationship with the meaningfully public world. Until then and for the first time, I have an answer to “Who is John Galt?” His name is Tony Hsieh.

---

[36] Quoted in Schoenmann, “Joe Downtown: Gentrification or Positive Progress?”

[37] There are a growing handful of descriptions like this. One of the best: “It’s like a scene in Aliens where they try to imagine how humans act.” (a visitor quoted in Bowles, “Downtown Las Vegas Is the Great American Techtopia.”).
