

Bin City, Las Vegas

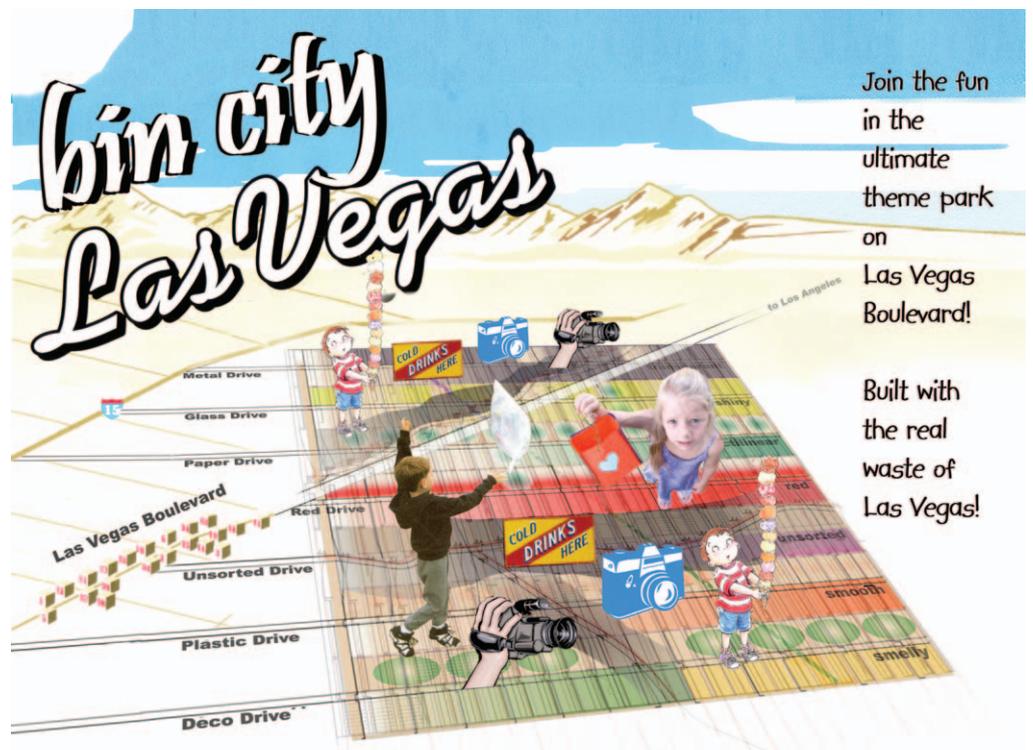
Beyond the town, the only transition between the Strip and the Mojave Desert is a zone of rusting beer cans. Within the town, the transition is ruthlessly sudden. Casinos, whose fronts relate so sensitively to the highway, turn their ill-kempt backsides toward the local environment, exposing the residual forms and spaces of mechanical equipment and service areas.

—Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*¹

This hardly famous passage from a well-known book caught my attention, but only in retrospect, because it makes a passing observation that is vital to my project: the as yet under-examined connection between a culture of leisure and spectacle and a (non-) culture of mass consumption turning into masses of waste. Drawing on the notion of waste as social construction and, further, on the legibility of trash patterns as records of human consumption, my project adds a specific site to a special place: Bin City (Figure 1). Located at the edge of Las Vegas, Bin City acts as a space of entanglement between the urban and the ecological, consumption and recycling, and trash and tourism—a place where technological management, critical knowledge, and playful experience converge.

Vegas Waste

Las Vegas, Nevada, Sin City in the desert: its hotels, casinos, and restaurants generate more than half-a-million tons of waste per year, enough to cover an American football field 10 m deep each day. Las Vegas hotels generate more trash than most other tourist destinations. Las Vegas sells the “freedom to waste” as an amenity. “All you can eat” buffets—the Las Vegas tourist’s dream—produce 25% more waste than *à la carte* restaurants, and the large number of quick-service restaurants adds to the waste stream because they typically use very little recyclable material. Also, Las Vegas is a city of lights using countless light bulbs that end up in the waste deposit. In a country where tele-



1. Bin City, Las Vegas. Postcard.

phone books have added significantly to the volume of waste dumps, it is not insignificant that Las Vegas, due to its rapid growth, is the only U.S. town that issues new telephone books not once but twice a year.

This detritus is intimately linked to Las Vegas’ conspicuous consumption, but the trash itself is nearly invisible. Waste is strictly separated in space and time from the lavish spectacle of revelry, removed as soon as it appears, and taken backstage



2. Map showing density trash bins on Las Vegas Boulevard.
3. Themed styling of trash bins on Las Vegas Boulevard.
4. Aerial photograph of Las Vegas.
5. Photomontage showing one day's trash in a football stadium.
6. Diagram showing daily and annual amounts of waste from Las Vegas.

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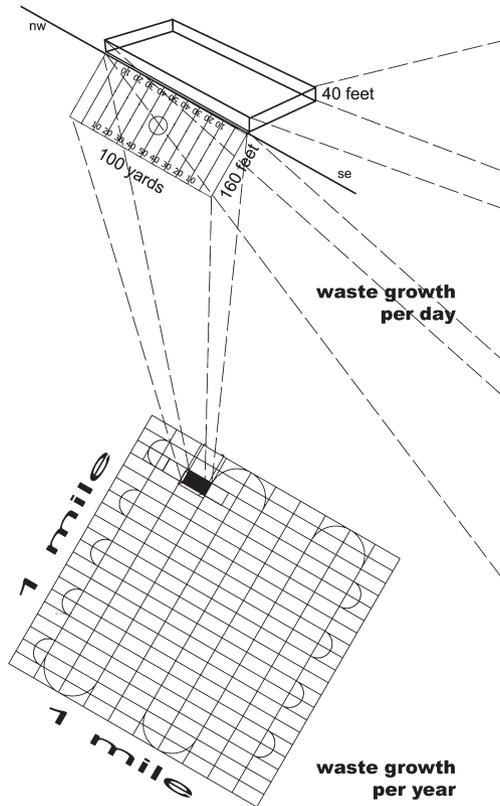
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busy with alluring spectacles and events, and away from the hidden busyness of the hotels' back stages. Behind the scenes, there is a spectacle of another kind: masses of rubbish are being collected, processed, and moved away from the backyard. The casino waiter you reward for service is just the tip of the personnel iceberg: At MGM Grand, one of Las Vegas' largest hotel-casino complexes, for instance, crews are busy sorting waste twenty-four hours per day in three 8-hour shifts. From the backyards of the casino, a journey of waste usually ends at a landfill, where the valueless is processed and piled up in layers forming a field of trash that finally replicates the surrounding landscape of the Nevada desert.

The Desert Dump

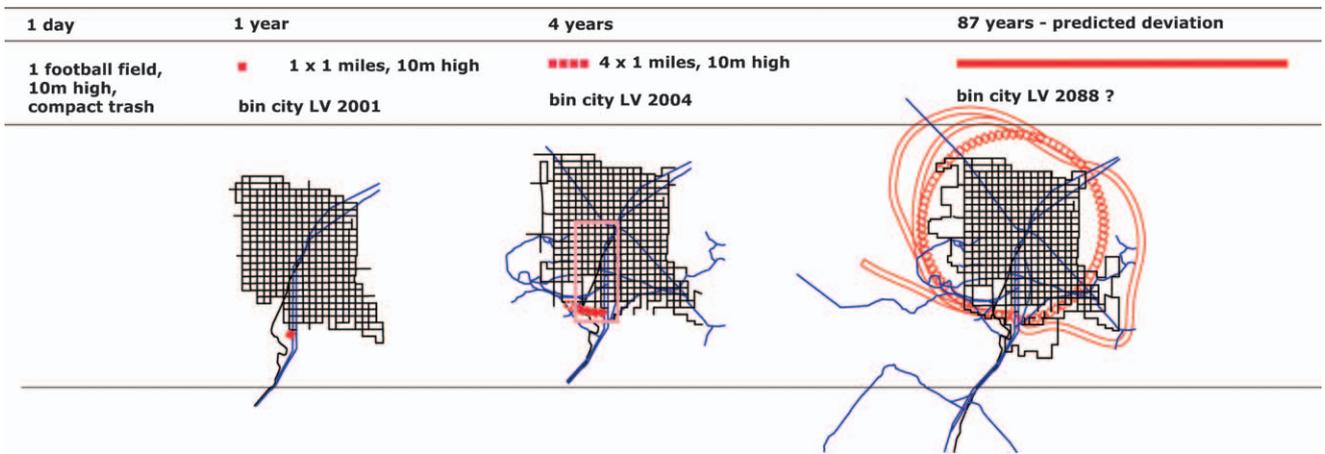
The desert is a sublime landscape. The seen and the unseen, the clean and the "deserted" confront one another in a landscape formed by a tension between the wide open view and the unusual perception of space depth and distance. The American desert seems always to have been a place for dumping; its wide, all-concealing emptiness invites being used for all kinds of disposal, including illegal waste dumps. The desert has also hosted more nefarious activities providing sites for military testing of nuclear bombs and burial grounds for radioactive materials. (In the high-level security area of Yucca Mountain, ninety miles from Las Vegas, buried nuclear waste will remain dangerous for a few thousand years.) Las Vegas itself has courted spectators seeking a glimpse of an actual nuclear bomb test as well as staging atomic spectacles of its own such as the Miss Atomic Bomb Contest (1957). A recently opened museum of atomic history in Las Vegas describes how tourists sipped cocktails on casino

into the hidden margins. But with careful observation and at certain times, guests can catch a glimpse of the backstage activities on the front stage. At 5:00 a.m., when gamblers are fewest in number and slowest in perception, cleaning personnel silently wipe the floors and empty the trash bins. Only at this time do the guests realize that a large number of what appear to be decorative sculptures are in fact trashcans designed and shaped to fit inconspicuously into the theme of the casino (Figure 2). At the "New York, New York"

casino complex, workers drive trash containers camouflaged as NYC yellow taxicabs. Because they are densely located, the trash bins rarely become full, thus preserving the illusion that they are figural elements used to structure public space, themed furniture, or advertising surfaces for rent. Where trash bins are usually seen as "interfaces" with a process of waste disposal, in Las Vegas they "interface" with the world of consumption.

Exercising strong control over aesthetic distance and point of view keeps the tourists' eyes

- 7. Predicted growth of Bin City.
- 8. Proposed layout of yearly waste units.



roofs while watching mushroom-shaped blast clouds on the horizon at the test site sixty-five miles to the northwest. The same museum features a theme park bunker where tourists can experience a simulated nuclear explosion.

Bin City and the Spectacle of Wasting

Bin City begins with a fascination with Las Vegas' hidden landscapes of waste that are as ephemeral and magnified as the spectacles that produce them.² In contrast to the archaeologist who sifts through the detritus of time, this project proposes an archeology of the present that explores the inconspicuous detritus of Las Vegas' conspicuous consumption. Instead of the puritanical dictum, "waste not, want not," waste becomes sublime as sites of renewed desire: "waste, want."³ Instead of hiding the by-products of everyday consumption from view and allowing them to gradually be assimilated into the surrounding desert (the function of ordinary landfills), Bin City proposes to situate them in the foreground as a spectacular environment of waste. Located at the southern end of Las Vegas Boulevard (a.k.a. "The Strip"), Bin City is a waste-themed park, greeting and bidding farewell to visitors traveling from and to Los Angeles.

The daily trash production of Las Vegas, spatialized into the scale of the football field, a national topographic icon, becomes the new modular unit for structuring the landscape. Three hundred and sixty-five days of trash production fills another well-known spatial figure: a one-mile square (Figure 3). Bin City is laid out to encircle Las Vegas, adding another square mile of waste for each year. Statistics become spatial units that trace the continuum of urban waste production.

Thus, Bin City circumscribes the rapid expansion of Las Vegas with the continuously growing landscape of waste in the desert. Bin City faces off

against Sin City, its open-ended construction constraining the supposedly open-ended spread of the city into the desert (Figure 4).

Rhythms of Decay

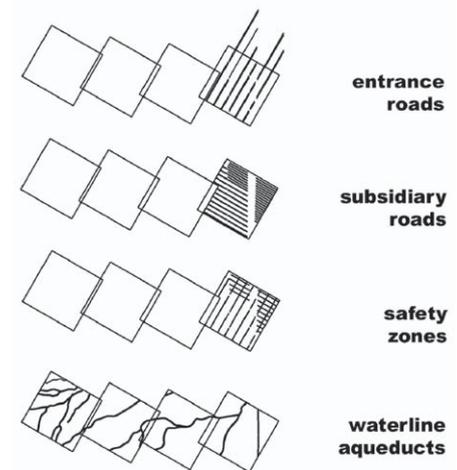
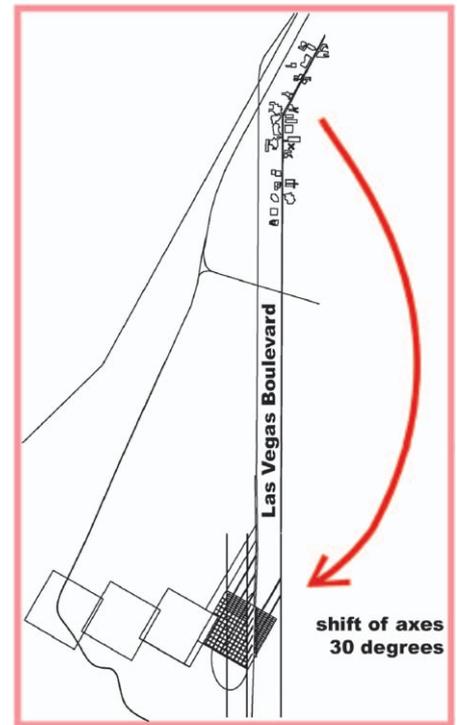
Bin City is a landfill that wants to be seen, a multisensory tourist attraction constructed out of the disposable by-products of the Las Vegas life style. In an ordinary desert landfill, waste would eventually be assimilated into the landscape, either becoming like the desert sand or covered by it. In Bin City, waste remains alien to the desert, organized by a preconstructed, modular landscape (Figure 5).

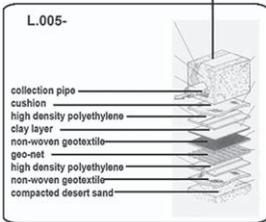
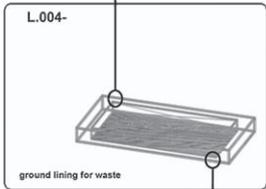
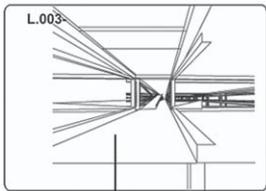
This new landscape unfolds in three overlapping temporal rhythms:

Stage 1: Anticipation. At the start of construction, the emptiness of the skeleton (or of parts of it) is a spectacle in its own right. This prefabricated framework is set in place forming a neutral structure, 10 m high and structured in American football field modules, for organizing the field of trash that will soon arrive (Figure 6).

Stage 2: Bin City Acts as a Machine (Figure 7). Trucks arrive, delivering new waste, which is sorted, piled up, processed, and compressed then inserted into the modular, ever-decaying landscape. Garbage is processed to harvest latent energies: The decaying process produces methane gas that feeds the voracious energy appetite of Las Vegas.

Stage 3: The Waste is Settling. This stage confronts us with the long-durational rhythms of decomposition in which the waste landscape unfolds its shape-shifting qualities: Within this changing topography, sections evolve at different rates—"fast space," "slow space," "disposable space," "decaying space," or "growing space." Some are





9. Model and construction details of landscape skelet
10. Model showing landscape in three construction stages with fields of red trash in the background.



accessible for only a limited time before they disappear forever (Figures 8 and 9). These unique, ephemeral sites offer possibilities for public events and short-time visits. Visitors may contribute to the Bin by adding trash or taking some away as a free souvenir.

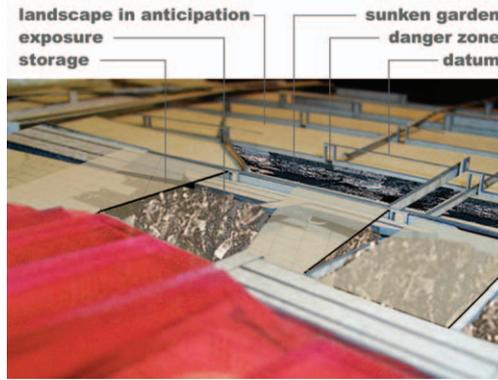
Curating the Collection

Bin City is a multisensational landscape of different materials, odors, grades of decay, colors, fluids, and ground conditions. The masses of waste will be classified and separated according to material or affective qualities, for example, paper or glass; smooth, rectilinear, smelly, or loud waste; or glittering trash or trash of a certain color.

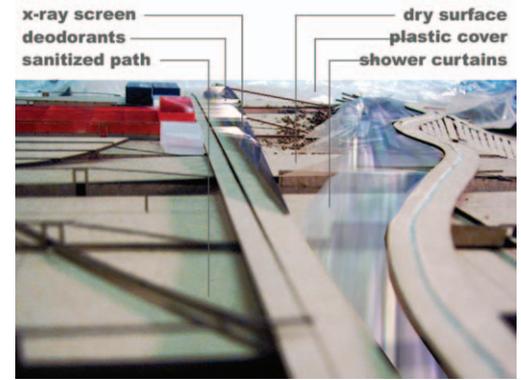
Annually appointed curators—artists and gardeners of the collections—would be given the task of classifying, interpreting, and zoning the yearly accumulation. In a first approach to curating, one could think of separating trash not only into its usual classification—metal, glass, paper, decomposable plastics, and unsorted household trash—but also to single out all kinds of “red trash.” As a potential for an interaction between the “twin cities” (Las Vegas and Bin City), a curator could ask the population of the gambling metropolis to color-code their trash and separate anything that is red. A surplus provided by singling out trash in the signal color red would be the ability to trace waste flows and decipher labeling strategies. Moreover, in a country with notoriously underdeveloped standards and habits in waste separation, accumulating the red trash separately can act as a playful initiation into practices of individual waste management. Finally, one need not call upon the obvious analogy to a bed of roses to estimate the aesthetic (even ornamental) qualities of the stripe of red trash in the desert and waste landscape.

This system of classification and zoning will translate spatially into landscape fields (like plant fields) and also provide orientation and city-grid-like semantics by allowing the municipality to name the access roads for the garbage trucks according to

- 11, 12. Various landscape scenarios.
 13. Zoning and subclassification of types of waste.



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the type of waste they lead to (“Paper Road,” “Metal Drive,” “Glass Boulevard,” and the like) (Figure 10).

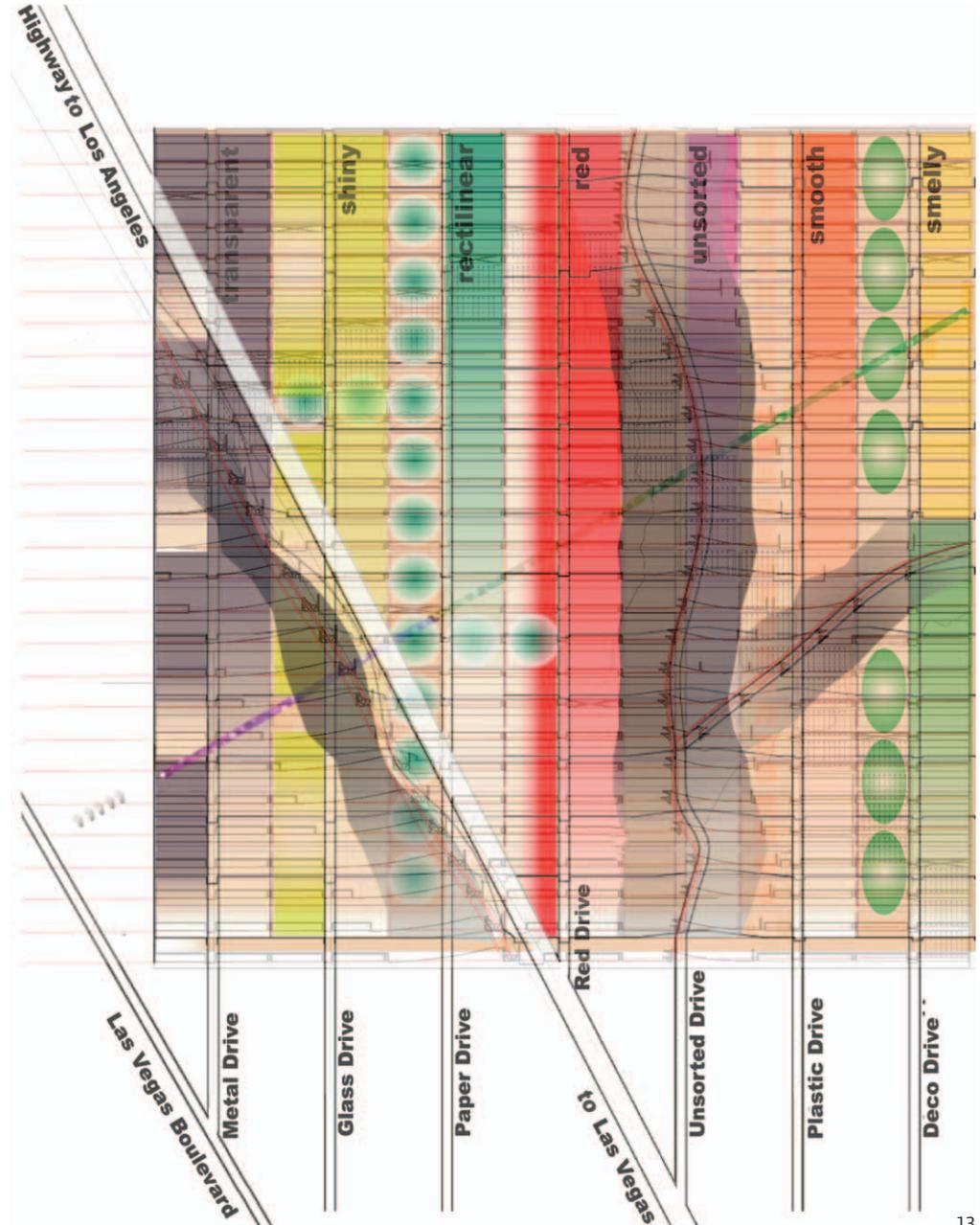
Inside the Trash

Instead of digging through trash piles, visitors to Bin City encounter a comfortable double wall system throughout the landscape where they can experience the thrill of protected immersion in the trash—with maximum security and hygiene. In special “comfort zones,” the trash is retained and kept separated from the public by stretchable textiles held apart by steel tubes; magnifying glasses provide spectacular views into the trash, in the manner of sea-world immersion rides (Figures 11 and 12). In “danger zones,” woven rubber bands precariously retain the trash, holding it “in suspense”; here, the waste can be not only viewed but also touched, grabbed, felt, and smelled (Figures 13 and 14). At a larger, landscape-oriented scale, open suspension bridges allow the public to hike across mountains of waste (Figure 15).

Reevaluation

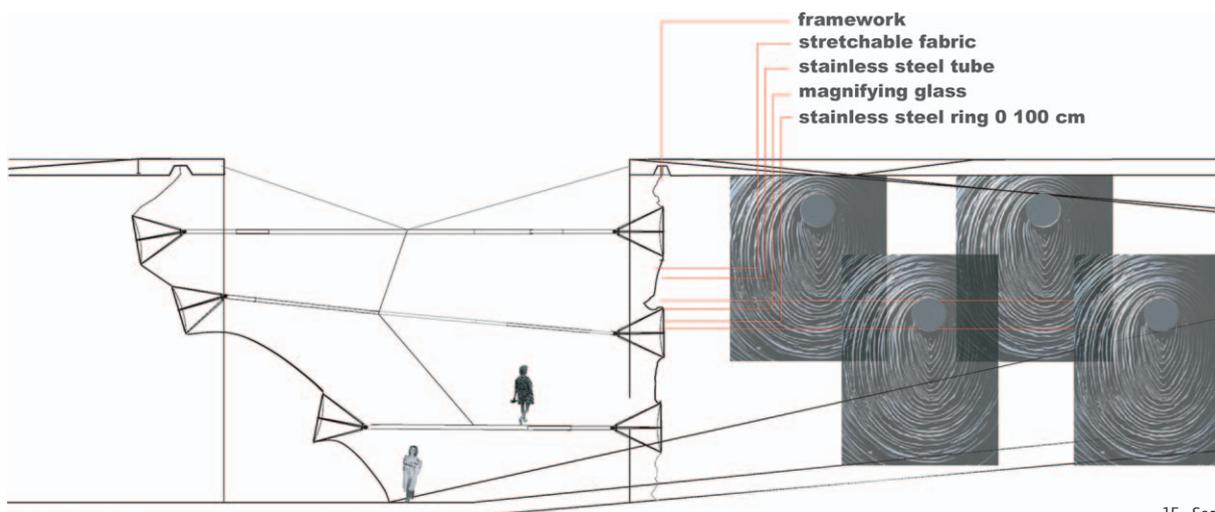
Waste is one of the traces and symptoms of contemporary culture. When Paparazzi garbologists dig through celebrities’ trash bins, they are engaging in an archeology of the everyday where waste contains interpretable signs of culture and social life. Just recently, the last human excrements of Elvis Presley were offered for purchase on e-bay. A similar reevaluation of waste—this time, however, collective—as a potential for undisciplined sensual pleasures is performed in and by Bin City. Its landscape provides access for voyeuristic insights into other people’s (as well as our own) anonymous mass consumption behaviors and thus into our joys of wasting.

A structural parallelism between the interpretation of waste and historically/urbanistically themed entertainment environments finally allows Bin City to act as a rereading of Las Vegas as a city

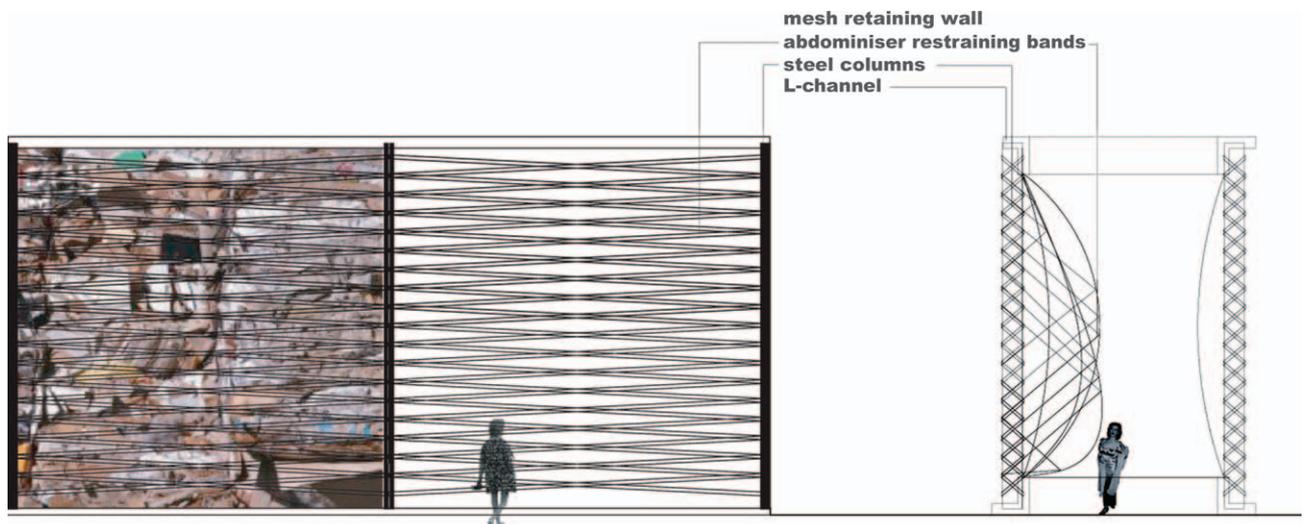


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14. Inside the trash, in-between the double wall system: "comfort zones."



15. Section of a "comfort zone".



17. View and section of the rubber band wall in a "danger zone."



recycling cities. The themed leisure complex of the Las Vegas type reuses the architecture of ancient Rome, early-modern Paris, or high-modern New York as spectacular fragments detached from their contexts. It disposes of cultural-historical waste by allowing us to play with and immerse ourselves in it.

In a similar vein, Bin City highlights the role of the metropolis as spatialized, rhythmic memory: It orients us in our explorations of matter-out-of-place that can be fed into structures of critical knowledge as well as into the intensities of more playful types of self-confrontation (seeing who we

are in our waste). Bin City is another spectacle and experiential site for travelers exploring the U.S. southwestern deserts and at the same time it witnesses Las Vegas' All-American waste culture.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Drehli Robnik for the helpful discussions.

Notes

1. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), p. 35.

2. *Bin City, Las Vegas* began in 2000 as my thesis project (adviser: Elizabeth Diller) at the School of Architecture, Princeton University (Fulbright Scholarship), and was awarded the Butler Travelling Prize.

3. See Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999). Other important references of this text include: Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); William Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage: What Our Garbage Tells Us about Ourselves* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992); and Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).