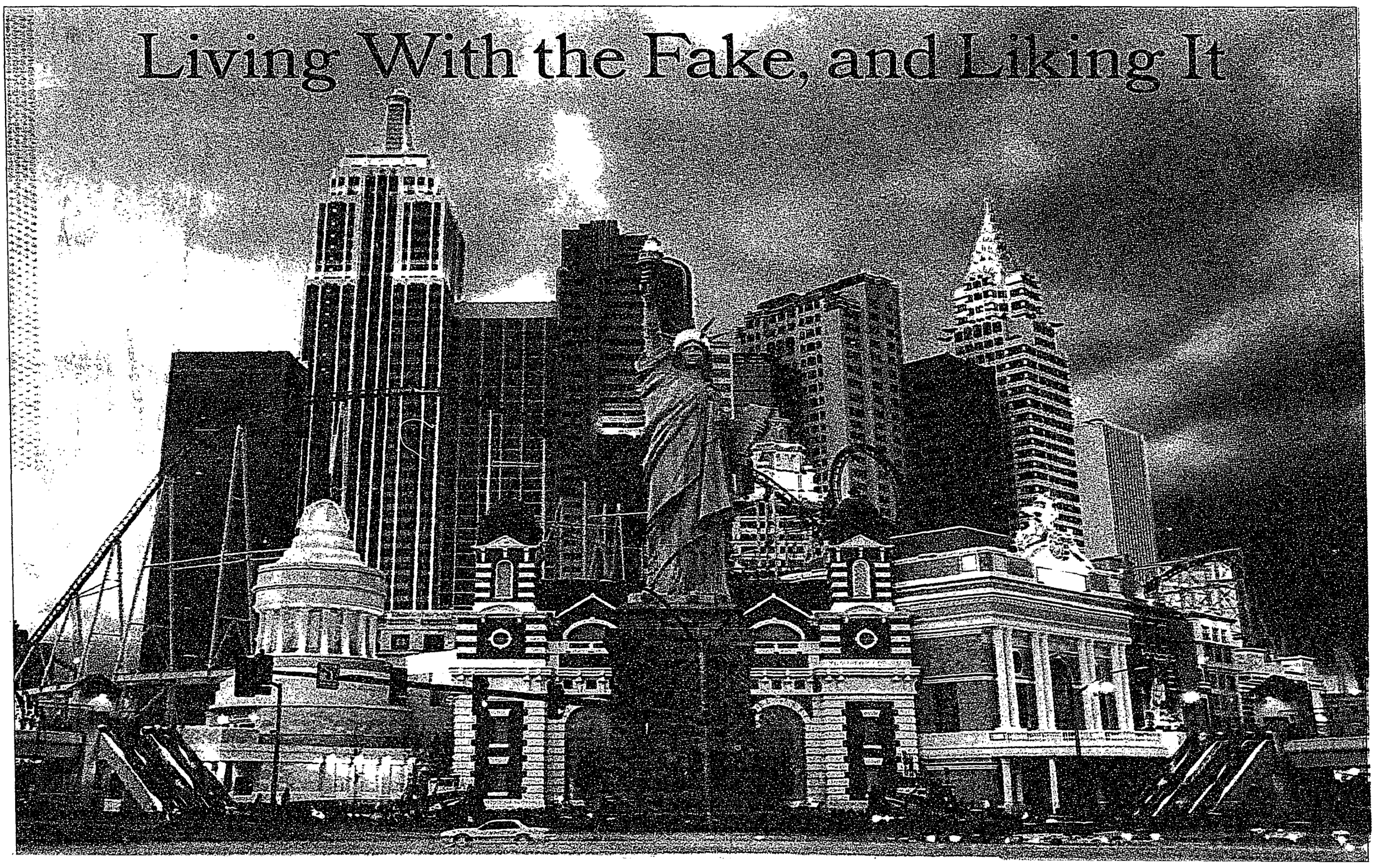
Living With the Fake And Learning to Like It: Surrogate experience ...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Mar 30, 1997; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. H1



Jack Dempsey/New York, New York Hotel and Casino

New York, New York, a new hotel and casino complex in Las Vegas that opened in January—A crowd-pleasing example of architecture as playacting, holding none of the risk of a trip to the real city.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

I DO NOT KNOW JUST WHEN WE LOST OUR sense of reality or our interest in it, but at some point it was decided that reality was not the only option. It was possible, permissible and even desirable to improve on it; one could substitute a more agreeable product. Architecture and the environment as packaging or playacting, as disengagement from reality, is a notion whose time, alas, seems to have come. Give or take demolition and natural disasters, architecture is the most immediate, expressive and lasting art to ever record the human condition. Cities are the containers and generators of our history and culture. We are what we build; stone and steel do not lie. But there has been a radical change in the way we perceive and understand this physical reality.

Surrogate experience and synthetic settings have become the preferred American way of life. Environment is entertainment and artifice; it is the theme park with the enormously profitable real-estate bottom line and a stunning record as the country's biggest growth industry. Build an "enclave" of old buildings moved out of the path of development, and you have the past; build a mall and multiplex, and you have the future. Build a replica of New York in Las Vegas as a skyscraper casino with Coney Island rides, and you have a crowd-pleaser without the risk of a trip to the Big Apple.

Distinctions are no longer made or deemed necessary between the real and the false; the edge usually goes to the latter, as an improved version with defects corrected — accessible and user-friendly. As usual, it is California that sets the trends and establishes the values for the rest of the country. Only a Californian would observe that it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell the real fake from the fake fake. All fakes are clearly not equal; there are good fakes and bad fakes. The standard is no longer real versus phony but the relative merits of the imitation. What makes the good ones better is their improvement on reality.

The real fake reaches its apogee in places like Las Vegas, where it has been developed into an art form. Continuous, competitive frontages of moving light and color and constantly accelerating novelty lead to the gaming tables and hotels. The purpose is clear and the solution is dazzling; the result is completely and sublimely itself. The outrageously fake fake has developed its own indigenous style and life style to become a real place. This is an urban design frontier where extraordinary things are happening.

Surrogate experience and synthetic settings are now an acceptable, even preferred, way of American life.

The Los Angeles architect Jon Jerde, an established master of the modern shopping mall and all its clones and offspring, understands this transformation well. Using a salesman's pitch and psychologist's insights he speaks of "place making," in which advanced technology and programmed perceptions are used for unprecedented solutions and sensations. The dream of pedestrianism, so valiantly and fruitlessly pursued by planners who have looked to the past and overseas for models of historic hill towns and plazas, has been aggressively naturalized; the social stroll has become a sensuous assault. In a Jerde makeover, a 1,400-foot-long, 90-foot-high arched space frame spans Las Vegas's Fremont Street — the original, now dated Strip — wrapping the nighttime walker in a computer-generated sound and light show provided by 211 million lights and a 540,000-watt sound system. This "Fremont Street experience" is billed as "a linear urban theater for pedestrians along the city's familiar icon and historic heart."

Yes, Virginia, Las Vegas has a historic heart; you are too young to remember, but Fremont Street was invented and incorporated in 1905. More than 90 years old now, and getting a little tired, it is part of historic America along with Williamsburg and more recent landmarks like Route 66, the Mom and Pop motel and the earliest golden arches of McDonald's.

The street is still evolving in a uniquely American way. It would be a mistake, as the Swiss philosopher and student of American urbanism André Corboz has pointed out, to mistake Las Vegas for Monte Carlo. A singular confluence of desire, flash and the big sell has created its character and destiny. Built to be exactly what it is, this is the real, real fake at the highest, loudest and most authentically inauthentic level of illusion and invention. It must be understood on its own terms.

Since gambling has been renamed gaming (another triumph of still another uniquely American phenomenon, public relations), and thus cleansed of all pejora-

Continued on Page 40

Ada Louise Huxtable is an architecture critic and historian. This article is excerpted from her latest book, "The Unreal America: Architecture and Illusion," to be published next month by the New Press.

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

Living With the Fake And Learning to Like It

Continued From Page 1

tive connotations and rendered euphemistically harmless, it has emerged at the top of the list of America's favorite pastimes. Today, Las Vegas and Atlantic City (one offers the desert and the other the ocean to those who venture outdoors) are being touted as family vacation spots.

It has finally come together: the lunar theatrical landscape of the Strip and the casino hotels, the amusement park and the shopping mall, all themed and prefabricated and available as a packaged vacation for all. Morris Lapidus's Miami hotels of the 1950's — the unforgettable gilded excesses of the faux-French Fontainebleau and the sluggish crocodiles in the equally faux jungle under the Americana's lobby stairs — have evolved into the breath-stopping extravaganzas of Caesar's Palace with its heroic Styrofoam statuary and the Luxor's Sphinx and mirror-glass pyramid.

The latest drop-dead entry in this pantheon of exuberant terminal pretense is New York, New York, a hotel and casino complex designed as a pastiche of New York's most famous buildings; a collage of pin-striped towers makes its wonderfully improbable facade.

In front of this mirage-mélange of skyscrapers is a dotty row of older New York landmarks, side by side, almost holding hands — Grant's Tomb, Ellis Island, Grand Central Terminal, the Brooklyn Bridge and SoHo's cast-iron Haughwout store (a dead giveaway that some real New York architecture buffs have been at work) all laced together with the airy, looping curves of a giant roller coaster. The architects, Gaskin & Bezanski, working with the firm of Yates-Silverman, seem to have perfected the genre of inspired looniness and outer-edge spectacle of the best of these undertakings.

THE FAMILY THAT GAMES TOgether also shops together in the Forum Shops, a 250,000-square-foot addition to Caesar's World, where moving sidewalks take them through six triumphal arches rising from cascading fountains into the streets of stores. "Your typical Roman via," the critic Aaron Betsky reported on the occasion of the grand opening in 1992, "where the sun sets and rises on an electronically controlled cycle, continually bathing acres of faux finishes in rosy hues. Animatronic robots welcome you with a burst of lasers, and a rococo version of the Fountain of the Four Rivers drowns out the sound of nearby slots. In Las Vegas, "history repeats itself neither as farce nor as tragedy but as a themed environment."

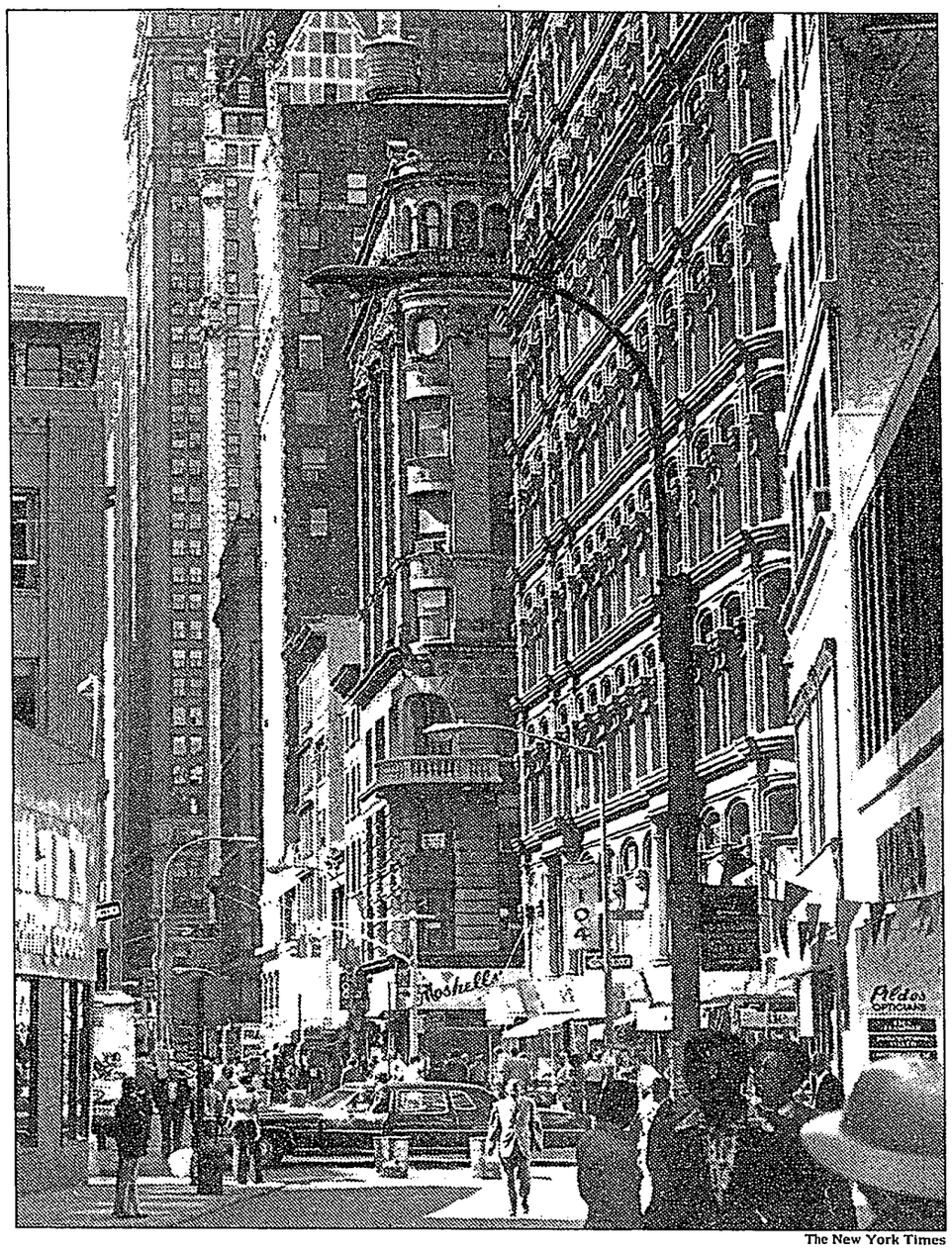
Once the substitute, or surrogate, is considered the more acceptable experience, remarkable things occur. There are rain forests in Las Vegas that casino guests find infinitely more impressive than the South American variety; they prefer the combination of tropicana and silks (the trade name for false foliage) with the added attraction of live white tigers.

In Texas, when movie makers planned a film about the Alamo and found the real landmark small and unprepossessing, they built a bigger and better Alamo in a nearby town. Today both the false and the genuine Alamo are equally popular tourist attractions. (If one is good, two are better. And the new, improved version is best of all.) A start has been made on taking the pressure off national parks by bringing tourists to a high-tech show-and-tell presentation of Zion Park, with a drive-by en route; one can experience it all that way and still get to Vegas by night.

Nor are the fine distinctions between the real fake and the fake fake always clear.

Jim Wilson/The New York Times

City Walk at Universal Studios in Los Angeles, above—A caricature of Main Streets all over America that cleverly imitates the shopping, eating and socializing opportunities of real places like Nassau Street in Manhattan, right.



The New York Times

The surrogate version is rarely sublime; more often it is a reduced and emptied-out idea based on what Corboz has called the "poverty of the re-invention of the not known." Surprisingly, it is only in the free-wheeling and not too fussy commercial world that the substitute comes off. At a higher level, confusion is encouraged in a much more subtle and insidious and dangerous way. In the world of art and scholarship, where they really know the difference, there is a growing interdependence of the real and the fake, with a disturbing identification of the values of the original and the copy. The slippage is taking place at institutional and cultural sources that have always been the defenders and keepers of authenticity.

We are what we build; stone and steel do not lie. But the way we perceive and understand physical reality has radically changed.

Museums, dependent on tourism, must compete for attendance with entertainment-geared attractions. That takes a lot of hype and high-class souvenirs in the gift shop.

The art, science and culture museum of the University of California at Berkeley, located not in Berkeley but in the affluent suburb of Blackhawk, augmented a 1991 show of New Guinea artifacts with a "science theater," where an experience called Nature's Fury produced a rocking earthquake simulation from a mini-volcano; going a step further for "lifelike" relevance appropriate to the community, a suggested survivor's kit was displayed in the trunk of a BMW. Life-size scenes in narrative settings subordinate the thing itself to a dramatic re-creation. With nothing to recommend them except their often shabby authenticity, the real objects simply have less appeal than snappy simulations.

While art museums are more removed from the tourist track where "the world's great masterpieces" are re-created in everything from living tableaux to glow-in-the-dark copies on velvet, even the primary citadels have not escaped the trend. High art has been "contaminated" — this is the semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco's word; no one else would dare use it — by the "blurring of the boundaries" of original and reproduction. It is common practice for originals, reconstructions and reproductions to be mingled in an effort to bring museum displays "to life"; one must read the exhibition labels to know what is real and what is not.

The leveling of the works of art with copies for sale in the museum shop is omnipresent. The ostensible purpose of the reproduction, to make one want the original, has been supplanted by the feeling that the original is no longer necessary. The copy is considered just as good and, in some cases, better; Eco and the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard both argue that the simulation replaces the original to become the reality in most minds, even if this is not overtly expressed, and even in those places meant to guard the uniqueness and the meaning of the work of art.

According to the American cultural historian Margaret Crawford and Richard Sennett, the novelist and sociologist who specializes in the philosophical and symbolic aspects of urbanism, there is a relationship between the museum shop and that feature of mall salesmanship called "adjacent attraction." In both the commercial and the cultural setting, there is a transfer of values, from real objects of esthetic and historical validity to lesser products.

Even when direct copies are not involved, the frequent use of real objects as promotional devices raises the price and perception of the thing for sale, through the kind of association that "blurs the boundaries," as Eco expressed it. But the process also works both ways. The commodity (for a price) becomes identified with the qualities of the object (no price, or even, in the case of artworks, priceless), so that the same value is given to both.

The blurring of the boundaries has now become a constant in scholarship and connoisseurship. The computer substitutes the picture on the screen for the original work of art. Because the computer and the camera have made available an incredible array of research sources, arcane problems can be explored as never before; scholars can deal with masses of data and remote collections of awe-inspiring completeness and diversity. This is one of the seductive miracles of the electronic age. Entire dissertations can be written without ever seeing the originals. Access is increasingly limited to the fragile drawings, documents and rare books that are primary resources.

SINCE THIS IS THE POINT OF scholarship where the eye is trained, the loss of direct contact is incalculable. It is through the immediate visual and sensory response engendered by repeated exposure to the actual work of art that connoisseurship is created — the related sequence of close knowledge and informed taste by which works of art can be accurately understood, compared, defined, judged and enjoyed. There is no replacement for this primary experience — the direct connection with the hand of the artist in the actual touch of the pen or the stroke of the brush — no matter how technically perfect the reproduction.

Eco of the impeccable, bemused and outraged eye has given the subject of authenticity an unexpected and very important spin. Rather than liking reality or the real thing too little, he says, Americans love it too much. We are obsessed with reality, with the possession of the object, determined to have it at any cost, in the most immediate and tangible form, unconcerned with authenticity or the loss of historical, cultural or esthetic meaning. This pervasive attitude, established through a massive popular network, has "spread to the products of high culture and the entertainment industry," Eco notes, where the relationship among values, judgment and authenticity has virtually ceased to exist.

The theme park has no such problem of degenerative authenticity. Nothing in it is admired for its reality, only for the calculated manipulation and simulation of its sources. It is not surprising that much of the most popular and profitable development of the genre is spearheaded and bankrolled by the masters of illusion; the movie and entertainment businesses have become the major innovators and investors in theme parks and related enterprises.

An entire industry has sprung up to serve themed entertainment, providing those erupting volcanoes and fiberglass rock formations on the grounds of Las Vegas casinos; according to an industry spokesman "you get a very artificial appearance with real rock." Those who wonder what happened to American know-how have just not been looking in the right places.

With reality voided and illusion preferred, almost anything can have uncritical acceptance. For those without memory, nostalgia fills the void. For those without reference points, novelties are enough. For those without the standards supplied by familiarity with the source, knockoffs will do. Escalating sensation supplants intellectual and esthetic response.

For all of the above, the outrageous is essential. There must be instant gratification; above all, one must be able to buy sensation and status; the experience and the products must be for sale. The remarkable marriage of technologically based and shrewdly programmed artificial experience with a manufactured and managed environment, for a real-life substitute of controlled and pricey pleasures, is a totally American product and the real American dream. □