

From the World of Geography

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From mingling to bling bling: Las Vegas as a scene for a geographical conference

The conference

This year's annual meeting for the Association of American Geographers (AAG) took place in Las Vegas, the city of mixed emotions and instantaneous liminality. As the 105th annual meeting, the six day conference held March 22-27 drew over 7 000 attendees and over 4 000 presentations (AAG 2009). The conference can only be defined as huge; hence the mingling possibilities are also substantial. However, one has to plan a session itinerary carefully, because the best ways to get in contact with interesting new developments and people

is within the sessions. But finding a session that sounds interesting does not guarantee any academic value. There is no assurance that the presentation next to a 'guru' would be any other than an investigation of the vulgarism of Sauna, a statement of Albanian as a parent language of the world, or a contemplation of everydayness at a bus stop. But it is assuring to see that the 'guru's' in geography are ordinary people as well, with their coughs and technical difficulties. The AAG also offers a wide cross-reference of what is happening in the field of geography, especially in its Anglo-American main branch.



Figure 1&2. The conference room where our session took place and the front entrance to the Riviera Hotel and Casino, Photos Joni Vainikka 03/2009.

The conference itself was organized in two buildings. The main venue was a rather worn hotel (Riviera Hotel and Casino) that resembled some what of a Baltic ferry, with the difference that the evergreens were replaced with inescapable sound of slot machine jingles and tinkles. The secondary venue was the Las Vegas conference centre located a quarter of an hour walk away from the hotel. The conference centre itself was even bigger than the University of Oulu. Because of the distances planning ahead where to attend next from up to 60 simultaneous paper sessions, panel discussions, plenary or workshops, became even more important.

The meeting encouraged also dozens of Finnish geographers to participate, and at least eight geographers from the University of Oulu alone. The session that we, in this case Anssi Paasi, Kaj Zimmerbauer, Tanja Löytynoja and the author, organized was called Region and identity in a globalizing world: producing and reproducing state spaces. Although our session was placed to the last slot of the whole conference on Friday, a respectable number of regional geographers to conjure with attended with their luggage ready for the next departing

plane. Despite the technical hiccups the presentations went well and stimulated a commendable discussion well past the scheduled time frame. Although, number of researchers that are in the forefront of developing the field of geography are present at AAG conferences, basic mingling, apart from particular sessions, requires more effort in terms of finding people that you share research interests with. And then there is always the danger to sink into the nationalistic capsules that have a tendency to emerge. However, just by carrying a nametag alone, I came across with a potential relative and heard a compliment of the “famous Oulu University”.

The city

Las Vegas is the city of opportunities and disappointments. It is the city of entertainment and second chances, but

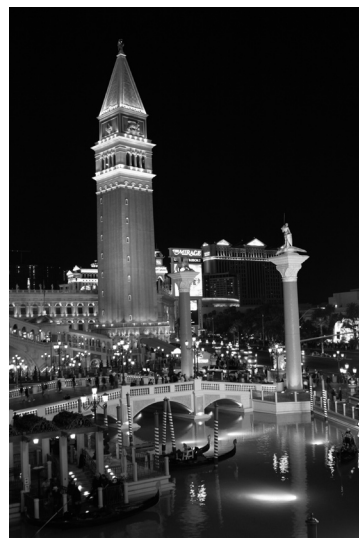


Figure 3&4. The older downtown and a Venetian scene along the Strip, Photos Joni Vainikka 03/2009.



Figure 5. The Grand Canyon, Photo Joni Vainikka 03/2009.

not as flashy for a conference visitor as the TV-series *Las Vegas* implies. The city drives from gambling and entertainment. The bling bling in the title refers to the cityscape of enticement and temptation the different hotels generate. The competition for high rollers and affluent visitors is fierce. The hotels and casinos on the Strip seem to have a stratified system seen in the sheer composition of their temporal residents. Apart from the Strip, where the most luxurious hotels all exist, the cityscape is rather dull – quarter after another lost in the mundane streetlights. Along the strip hotels differentiate with their landscaping, which are set up for a specific theme from Venice to New York, and from Paris to Rome. The reality of Las Vegas is that it offers all the romanticized holiday locations imaginable in a stereotyped fashion just without the big city hazzlers.

In a way the landscape is an institutionalized to themes and there is any real American to be found anywhere. These spaces create liminality with the only purpose of luring the flâneur or flâneuse into the casino sometimes with a promise of a free drink. That said, Las Vegas offers free perks for the

visitor. Starting from the old downtown the ‘Fremont Street Experience’ with a screen-on-top-of-a-façade with all-embracing Don McLean’s “American Pie” song on the hour is something not forgotten quite easily. On the strip the somewhat gendered and flammable pirate show in front Treasure Island, the extravagant fountain’s of Bellagio right next to a half sized Eiffel tower, moving statues of Atlantis inside Caesar’s palace, Gondolas with plump gondoliers around the Venetian and the colossal light beam of the Luxor Pyramid are just examples of the sights that can be spotted during the obligatory limousine ride.

Apart from the outdoor sights Las Vegas offers Cirque du Soleil theatrical show’s, concerts and plenty more. However, to avoid just listing them it has to be said that combining serious work with entertainment is not perhaps most effective way to enjoy Las Vegas. After sitting in six or seven sessions successively, there is a danger of falling asleep in company of 1 400 spectators in comfy chairs in the middle of the most gravity-defying acrobatic show.

I guess the biggest spectacle, comparable to the Grand Canyon located just few

hours drive away, was actually the Earth Hour organized around the globe on 28th of March. Witnessing an hour of at least reduced lighting in city metonymic for glow and luminosity produced a whole different feeling. The cityscape was there but without its usual clothing. People carried on gambling and doing what they would normally do on a Saturday night in Vegas, but just for an hour without the randomly blinking lights.

Get the grant

AAG is a great way to get to know geographers from all over the world. People dress casually, apart from economic geographers and those cultural geographers wanting to get an appointment. They are events where to build up researchers connections and talk about possible collaborations. However, in the case of Las Vegas 'getting a grant' has double connotations. Even though the sound of the slot machines might be grinding, there is an irresistible thing about them. And furthermore they are everywhere. They are certain kind of a cultural trait of the city, even found lined up at the McCarran Airport too. From the two cents wins to some bigger ones, the slots operate with casino specific vouchers, which to certain point, such as four dollars from Bellagio, work as a nice souvenirs. But when the 7-7-7 hits you, there is an incessant wait and even humiliation of how much is it. And you do not actually know how much you win before you take the voucher out. Getting a small grant this way is nice, but few leave Las Vegas with more money than

they had. Surely there is a temptation to try the 31 million dollar slot, but the wisest do not play at all nor get obsessed with the seven's.

Closing words

If the culture shock feels drastic in every other American city it slaps you in the cheek in Las Vegas, or then not at all. The city feels like a big theme park in a middle of what once was a windy desert. There is a feeling of going away all the time just because Las Vegas is one of those places, I for instance, couldn't imagine in for a longer time. The eight days in the city is quite long as the awe and wonder wears in few days not to mention that coming back to the northern winter can be quite depressing.

In all, the conference was well orchestrated and operated slick. There were enough signage, the sessions I participated mainly ran on time, and the organized social gatherings encouraged thousands. The conference widened understanding of contemporary debates and arguments around the science and gave even more appreciation what the field of geography is capable of studying.

References

- AAG (2009). Association of American Geographers | 2009 Annual Meeting. <<http://aag.org/annualmeetings/2009/index.htm>>. 14.10.2009