

Jorg von Uthmann, "Pompidou Center Celebrates Las Vegas Strip, Opens Metz Branchs."
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Pompidou Center Celebrates Las Vegas Strip, Opens Metz Branch

Review by Jorg von Uthmann

May 17 (Bloomberg) -- "Learning From Las Vegas," Robert Venturi's 1972 manifesto and one of postmodernism's sacred texts, can still drive orthodox architects up the wall.

Dismissing the dogma "Form follows function," Venturi, a Pritzker Prize winner, recommended "pleasure zones" such as Marienbad, the Alhambra, Xanadu and Disneyland as models.

The Pompidou Center in Paris has taken up the challenge and organized "Dreamlands," an exhibition of some 300 items -- chiefly photographs, maquettes, installations -- that are supposed "to interrogate our relationship to the world and time, to geography and history, to art and artifice, in the age of mass culture and mass leisure."

Don't be put off by the curatorial lingo. This is a fun show.

The title refers to Dreamland, an amusement park that opened in 1904 at Coney Island. Among other attractions, it offered a boat trip on Venetian canals, flanked by facades of painted canvas, and a hike in the Swiss Alps. The park burned down in 1911.

Dreamland was neither the first nor the last park of this type. The Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889 not only overwhelmed the visitor with the Eiffel Tower; Chinese pagodas, Khmer temples and Italian palazzi, all long gone, marched in "the great parade of human progress."

Pastiches are still popular with world fairs, yet they are small fry compared to Las Vegas, Orlando's Epcot Center and other permanent venues.

Pharaoh's Doormen

Lovingly, the show presents the "themed" casino-hotels on the Las Vegas Strip -- the golden sphinx and the Pharaonic headgear of the doormen at the "Luxor" and the St. Mark's Square, the Canal Grande and the Italian gondoliers at the 4,000-room "Venetian."

In a similar vein, the city of Leavenworth, Washington, decided in the 1960s to boost tourism by giving itself a Bavarian look.

It would be wrong, though, to assume that the artificial worlds are a purely U.S. phenomenon. The show includes views of the world's largest indoor water park in Miyazaki, Japan, with hundreds of swimmers enjoying the illusion of a Mediterranean beach and of an equally surreal skier's paradise in tropical Dubai.

Some fakes are less serious than others. For the 1939 New York World Fair, Salvador Dali designed a voluptuous version of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" in the "dry section" of the amusement area and, in the "wet section," staged an underwater ballet of nymphs.

Kader Attia, a French artist of Algerian origin, has created "Skyline," a mini-Manhattan, out of mirrored refrigerators. **Malachi Farrell, an Irishman who works in Paris, is more malicious: His installation "Nothing Stops a New Yorker" consists of cardboard skyscrapers sticking out of a garbage heap.**

Sterile Urbanism

Why are artificial paradises so popular, and why is revivalism in architecture rampant even in Bauhaus-inoculated Europe? Could there be a connection with the sorry state of contemporary urbanism and the sterility of our cities? The show is mum about these questions.

The Pompidou Center itself, say the organizers, is an offspring of the Fun Palace, a U.K. project of the early 1960s that was to resemble a shipyard with theaters, cinemas, restaurants and other meeting places for the postwar leisure society. The Fun Palace was never built, yet it inspired the Paris arts center's designers, Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano.

The center last week opened a branch in Metz, the capital of the Lorraine region. The elegant tent-like structure, designed by Shigeru Ban and Jean de Gastines, offers 5,000 square meters of exhibition space on three levels.

With the center's vast collection of modern and contemporary art at its disposal, the new museum will never experience the horror of empty walls. Whether it will be able

to do for the economically depressed region what the Guggenheim Museum did for Bilbao remains to be seen.

"Dreamlands" runs through Aug. 9. For details, see <http://www.centrepompidou.fr> or call +33-1-4478-1233. For more on Pompidou Metz, see <http://www.centrepompidou-metz.fr>

(Jorg von Uthmann is a critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)