

ECONOMY OF FASCINATION: DUBAI AND LAS VEGAS AS EXAMPLES OF THEMED URBAN LANDSCAPES

With 4 figures and 3 photos

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Zusammenfassung: Ökonomie der Faszination: Dubai und Las Vegas als Beispiele thematisch inszenierter Stadtlandschaften

Hohe Investitionen im Immobilien- und Tourismussektor sowie stark ansteigende Tourismus- und Zuwanderungszahlen haben in Dubai und Las Vegas zu einem anhaltenden Wirtschaftsboom geführt. Gleichzeitig ist vor dem Hintergrund einer Urban Governance und der Übertragung von Kompetenzen an private und semi-staatliche Akteure in beiden Metropolen ein rascher Stadtbau mit unzähligen Erlebnis-, Einkaufs- und Kunstwelten initiiert worden. Eine Entwicklung, die durch eine weitgehende Inszenierung der Lebenswelt und vor allem eine „Ökonomie der Faszination“ geprägt ist: Kasino- und Hotel-landschaften, die verschiedene Schauplätze vom antiken Rom bis zum heutigen New York simulieren, künstliche Inseln in Gestalt von Palmen oder ganzen Weltkarten sowie weitere Superlative in Form von thematisch inszenierten Einkaufszentren und Sportarenen sind die augenscheinlichsten Folgen dieser rasanten Entwicklung. Dubai und Las Vegas sind damit nicht nur Vorreiter einer allgemeinen Kommerzialisierung und Erlebnisorientierung im Zeitalter wirtschaftlicher und kultureller Globalisierung, sondern auch Extrembeispiele einer postmodernen Stadtentwicklung.

Im vorliegenden Beitrag werden anhand der beiden Beispiele Dubai und Las Vegas Leitlinien für eine Forschungsperspektive „Ökonomie der Faszination“ entwickelt. Für ein analytisches Verständnis sind zunächst allgemeine Trends und Entwicklungslinien vor dem Hintergrund von Urban Governance, Erlebnisorientierung und Kommerzialisierung wesentlich. Sie ergeben den Ausgangspunkt für eine Analyse der Wirkungsmechanismen von „Aufmerksamkeit“ und „Faszination“, die als wesentliche Aspekte einer „Ökonomie der Faszination“ gesehen werden. Für ein Verständnis dieser Mechanismen sind die wirtschaftlichen Zusammenhänge, Akteure und Handlungsprozesse von besonderer Bedeutung. In Anlehnung an GIDDENS' Strukturierungstheorie (1984) und BENNO WERLENS „Sozialgeographie alltäglicher Regionalisierungen“ (1995, 1997) bietet sich deshalb eine handlungstheoretische Grundperspektive an. Gleichzeitig werden jedoch die ökonomisch orientierten Bemühungen um Aufmerksamkeit über eine postmoderne Ästhetik und symbolische Aufladungen umgesetzt. Die Ausformulierung einer „Ökonomie der Faszination“ als Forschungsperspektive erfordert deshalb neben der handlungstheoretischen Grundperspektive eine Erweiterung um semiotische Ansätze.

Summary: Large investments in the real estate and tourism sector, as well as rising numbers of tourists and immigrants, have led to a sustained boom in Dubai and Las Vegas. At the same time, and against the background of an urban governance and the transfer of competences to private and semi-state actors in both metropolises, a brisk urban transformation has been embarked upon, with the creation of countless entertainment, shopping, and artificial worlds. This development is primarily characterised by the theming of everyday life, but above all an “Economy of Fascination”. The casino and hotel landscapes simulating various scenes from Ancient Rome to modern New York, artificial islands in the shapes of palm trees or whole world maps, as well as other superlatives in the form of themed shopping malls and sports arenas, are the most visible results of these rapid changes. Dubai and Las Vegas are not only the first in a general trend towards commercialisation and entertainment orientation in the age of economic and cultural globalisation, but they are also quite extreme examples of post-modern urban development.

This paper develops guidelines for a research perspective called “Economy of Fascination” and turns to Dubai and Las Vegas to exemplify the approach. An analytical understanding first builds on general trends and development lines against the backdrop of urban governance, entertainment orientation, and commercialisation. They form the starting point for an analysis of the mechanisms of “attention” and “fascination”, which are considered to be the main aspects of an “Economy of Fascination”. In order to understand these mechanisms the economic interrelations, protagonists, and processes of action are of particular importance. Following the “theory of structuration” by ANTHONY GIDDENS (1984) and the “social geography of everyday regionalisations” by BENNO WERLEN (1995, 1997), an action theory approach lends itself as a basic perspective. At the same time though, the economically-orientated attempts to gain attention are put into practice using post-modern aesthetics and symbolic ascriptions. Formulating an “Economy of Fascination” as a research perspective thus calls for an extension of the action theory to include semiotic approaches.

1 “Economy of Fascination” and the growing theming of urban landscapes

During the past two decades and in the course of economic and cultural globalisation most metropolises

have undergone far-reaching transformations towards an increasing commercialisation, theming, and focus on entertainment. One of the consequences of urban governance is that competences and responsibilities have been transferred to private and semi-state actors,¹⁾

while other consequences are that supermarkets have been turned into urban entertainment centres, pedestrian zones into festival marketplaces, and traditional housing areas have been converted to gated communities (e.g. FRANTZ a. COLLINS 1999; GOSS 1996; HEALEY et al. 2002; HUXTABLE 1997; LIGHT 1999; PIERRE 2001; SORKIN 1992; STEINECKE 2002; YOUNG 2002; ZUKIN 1991). Among the first in post-modern urban development have been locations with a strong leisure orientation such as Las Vegas, Orlando, or Dubai. They have all profited from extremely high investment and growth rates in the leisure and tourism sector over the past years. They laid the cornerstone for an “Economy of Fascination” by introducing numerous theme parks, resort hotels, and themed shopping worlds which today have also found their way into everyday life elsewhere (FIRAT a. DHOLAKIA 1998).

Festivalisation, theming, and hyper-reality are the catchwords of a fast-paced development which is increasingly reducing everyday “reality” and replacing it with a “culture of simulation” (OPASCHOWSKI 2000). As early as 1992 SORKIN announced the end of public space and the transition from reality to virtuality. Experience and reality are being virtualised, produced, and simulated but also manipulated, monitored, and controlled. With his conception of hyper-reality BAUDRILLARD (1978, 1988) even goes a step further: he sees the end of reality and claims instead a hyper-reality which is reproduced through itself. But from a less radical viewpoint one can speak of a “blurring” between “reality” and “virtuality”: “Since what we increasingly consume are signs or images, there is no simple ‘reality’ separate from such modes of representation” (LASH a. URRY 2002, 272; cf. SOJA 1996). A clear differentiation between “authenticity” and “simulation” seems rather problematic from a conceptual point of view anyway. Epistemological constructivism for instance states that reality is mediated through perception. Reality then can only be understood as subjective perception, and mediated and communicated through signs and symbols (e.g. WATZLAWICK 1998, 1999; GLASERSFELD 1997, 1998; FOERSTER 1998).

When turning to architecture one finds numerous examples of supposed authenticity which show various historical references and ideational models. ECO (1987) refers to ancient Rome with its Egyptian and Greek adaptations or to the Renaissance and Classicism, which also borrow from the ancient Greek and Roman periods. Reconstructions have thus served during different periods as a means for spatial and also temporal adaptations for “creating spatial closeness for temporal distance and for conveying history into an optical experience” (BREUER 1998, 232).

When turning to today’s themed productions and replicas it thus becomes clear that we are not looking at a new phenomenon. What is new, however, is the proliferation and commercialisation of the choice. As a result of commercialisation and in the “era of simulation” (BAUDRILLARD 1982), theming takes on a completely new quality. Not only is the emotional power of symbols (MEYER 1992) utilised, but a true “Economy of Attention” (FRANCK 1998) is pursued. Furthermore, by turning to historical associations familiar things are cited and put to use in the entertainment process. Repetitions and replicas are not the only things turned to; stimulus-intensive surrogate worlds are created: “Theme worlds offer substitute experiences without tasting like substitutes but are even more intense because they are more dense and failure-free than reality.” (BOLZ 1996, 159 et seq.). ECO (1987) stresses how close to reality artificial realities are and thus talks of “travels in hyper-reality”. GIDDENS (1991) also states a reality inversion in which experiences conveyed through the media appear to be more realistic than one’s own experiences. In many areas artificial productions have taken over from conventional everyday experiences. More and more, shopping, sport, and leisure activities take place in artificial and themed environments. Assisted by numerous visual effects as well as by sound and scent columns, a perfect world of experiences is created in which even time is staged and controlled. In some shopping worlds artificial sunrises and sunsets already produce a kind of timelessness and simulate a permanent repetition of the moment (KÖRNER et al. 1999; BREUER 1998; GEBHARDT 2000).

More and more, however, it has become a necessity to link different experiences. Mixed-use centres combine shopping opportunities with sporting and cultural events and on the other hand, sport and leisure attractions have to be extended by shopping opportunities (STEINECKE 2000, 2002; FRANCK 2000). Moreover, the selection has to be renewed in ever-shorter intervals in order to continuously attract visitors (WELSCH 1993). The half-life of entertainment attractions has dropped rapidly and even the renewal process is produced as an event: in Las Vegas, for instance, the demolition of old

¹⁾ The most visible expression of this urban governance are the so-called public-private-partnerships. Since the eighties these co-operations between the private and public sectors have gradually adopted tasks and functions which traditionally were dealt with by urban governments. Particularly in the field of urban development politics, public-private-partnerships have been granted far-reaching planning and action freedom (e.g. COCHRANE 1993; BEAUREGARD 2001; THOMAS a. IMRIE 1997; MOULAERT et al. 2001).

hotels and casinos is celebrated as a New Year's Eve spectacle with some hundred thousands of spectators (KLEIN 1999; DAVIS 1999; HESS 1999).

As a result many urban landscapes have more and more been transformed into conglomerates of entertainment productions, which in turn are being traded as the new model of an artificial and themed urbanity (e.g. LIGHT 1999; HUXTABLE 1997; GOSS 1996; SORKIN 1992; ZUKIN 1991). Triggered by the withdrawal of the public sector from an overall responsibility for urban space, commercialisation and profit orientation have clearly grown in importance. The growth of private urbanity has led to an overlapping and blending of themed consumption worlds and everyday life – hence to a blurring between reality and simulation (FEATHERSTONE 1991; FRANCK 1998; LASH a. URRY 2002).

2 *Dubai and Las Vegas as examples of themed urban landscapes*

In Dubai and Las Vegas there is an unparalleled convergence of commercialism and entertainment orientation. Both places are examples of an artificial and themed urbanity and possess remarkable basic requirements under the aspect of an “Economy of Fascination”: in Las Vegas the entertainment industry was able not only to resort to ample funds from the gambling sector and from Wall Street, but also to administrative freedom with regard to urban planning and gambling licenses (DAVIS 1999; HESS 1999; BOJE 2001). Dubai in contrast is characterised by a policy of economic diversification that provides the tourist and leisure industry with sufficient capital from the oil industry. In addition, their economic policy is very generous and liberal, which in turn has triggered a strong economic and urban growth.

Through the gambling and the oil industries Las Vegas and Dubai respectively have quite different points of departure. Nevertheless, they are remarkable examples of a radical commercialisation and entertainment orientation. In the past decades, both cities have realised spectacular projects with extensive financial investments that have not only changed the urban landscape, but have also created genuinely artificial worlds. Dubai and Las Vegas have long since established themselves as international entertainment locations and cater, with comparable symbols and images, to an international clientele.

Las Vegas is characterised by countless theme parks, resort hotels, and shopping malls that include replicas of city landscapes and historical themes as well as fictitious worlds from film and television (Fig. 1, Photos 1 and 2). Each entertainment world is designed with such

detail that even the staff are dressed according to the theme and included in the ‘dramaturgies’ (SOMOL 1999; KÖRNER et al. 1999). Nothing is left to chance. The experience is planned as a timed choreography and systematically brought to life through a script: “At the beginning of a new casino project [...] it is not the architect or decorator that start the planning phase, but rather experienced scriptwriters who develop a ‘storyboard’ that puts the visitor’s experiences into a timed choreography” (KÖRNER et al. 1999, 1972). Since the hotels and shopping malls ‘recreate’ entire cities and eras, the costs are correspondingly high. Construction costs of several billion dollars and daily operating costs of more than one million dollars are very common for Las Vegas theme hotels (PUTZ 1999). However, increasing revenues make these investments worthwhile and are leading to the development of even larger establishments, such as the Venetian in Las Vegas, which, with over 6,000 rooms after its extension will be the largest hotel in the world.

In the course of these developments Las Vegas has, during the past two decades, undergone a successful transformation from a gambling paradise to a fully diversified entertainment destination. The many casinos still play a major role, but apart from gambling, a broad range of leisure industry activities has been established. Countless leisure attractions, shopping opportunities, and sports events with over 37 million visitors a year make Las Vegas one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world – only surpassed by Shanghai (59.5 million), Orlando (42.7 million) and New York (37.8 million). Accordingly, Las Vegas held its own during the trying times in the American tourist industry after September 11th 2001. While the numbers of foreign visitors to the U.S. between 2000 and 2003 dropped dramatically from 50.9 to only 41.2 million, the numbers of visitors to Las Vegas remained almost constant during that period and increased in 2004 by 5.2% to 37.4 million visitors (WORLD TOURISM ORGANISATION 2003; LAS VEGAS CONVENTION AND VISITORS AUTHORITY 2005).²⁾

With approximately 6.2 million tourists annually the number of visitors to Dubai is significantly lower. However, as the world-wide comparison shows, the desert emirate is listed with the highest growth rate for visitors and hotel stays (Fig. 2). Leading tourism experts recently called this a “quantum leap” into the highest league of tourist destinations (BREMKE 2004). The intention behind this is to achieve independence from the

²⁾ The majority of visitors in Las Vegas come from the domestic market, while only 13% are foreign visitors.

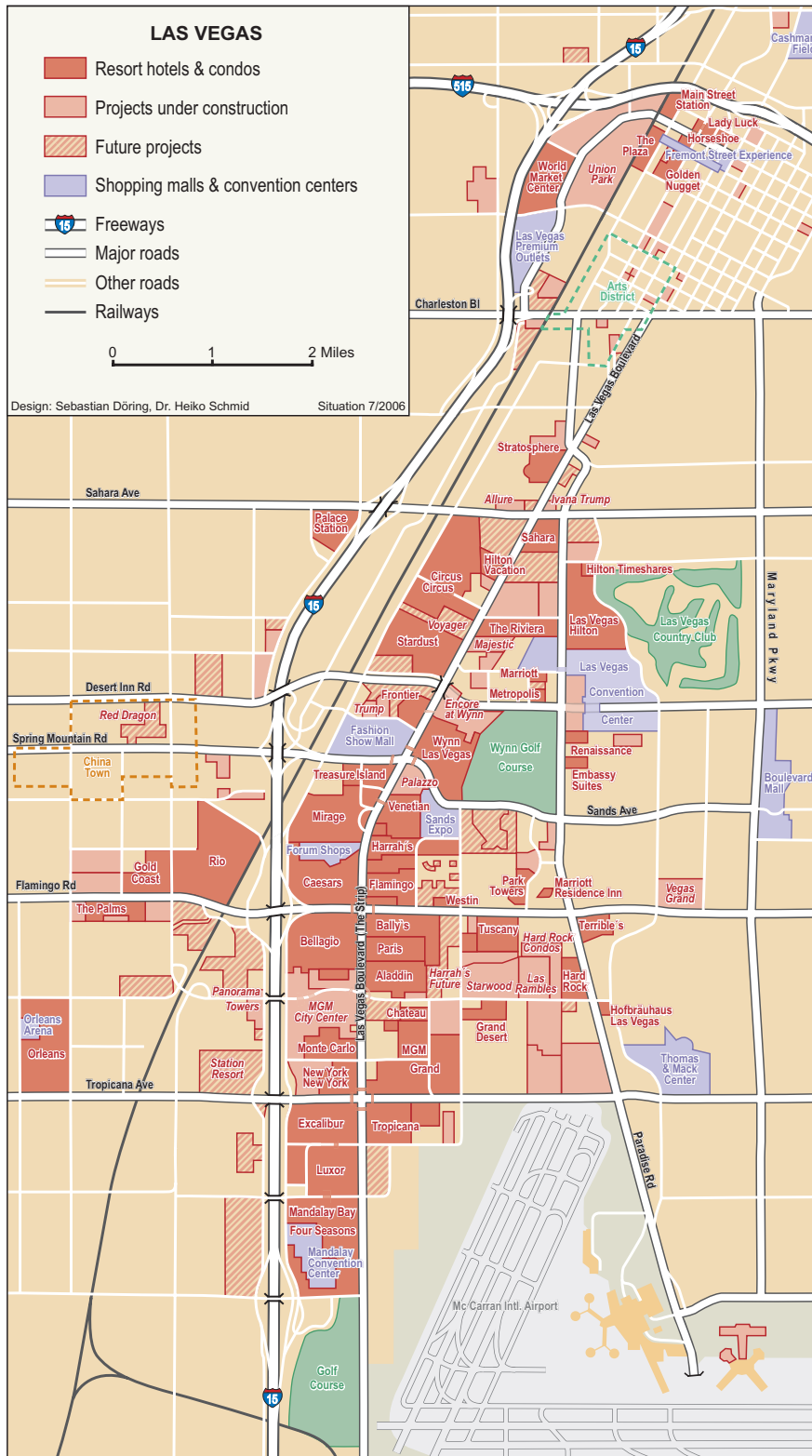


Fig. 1: Resort hotels and major projects on Las Vegas Boulevard
 Ressorthotels und Investitionsprojekte am Las Vegas Boulevard

declining oil revenues through economic diversification. This is the reason why the tourism, real estate, and infrastructure sectors are being heavily expanded through state-aid and private investments. The support of the fast growing Emirates Airline, as well as the progressive expansion of the airport, plays a key role in this development. Moreover, Dubai's attraction is based on spectacular projects. Entire "island empires" are emerging in the form of three palm trees, a world map, and a crescent waterfront as a landfill on Dubai's coastline (Fig. 3). The development of the islands and diving areas will mostly be designed as themes, following international models.³⁾ Other superlatives due to be com-

pleted within the next five years are "Burj Dubai", "Mall of Arabia" and "Dubailand", being the highest building, the largest shopping mall, and the largest theme park in the world respectively (IJTEHADI 2003).

Since the Emirate of Dubai granted foreigners permission to purchase property in the year 2001, the real estate market, already fuelled by tourism, has been booming even more. Through spectacular real estate projects, Dubai increasingly serves as a second home for the upper classes of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, India, Pakistan, Iran, and China. For Western investors, Dubai is also attractive both for investment and as a secondary place of residence. Since the Iraq war Dubai



Photo 1, 2: Theme worlds in Las Vegas

Inszenierte Themenwelten in Las Vegas

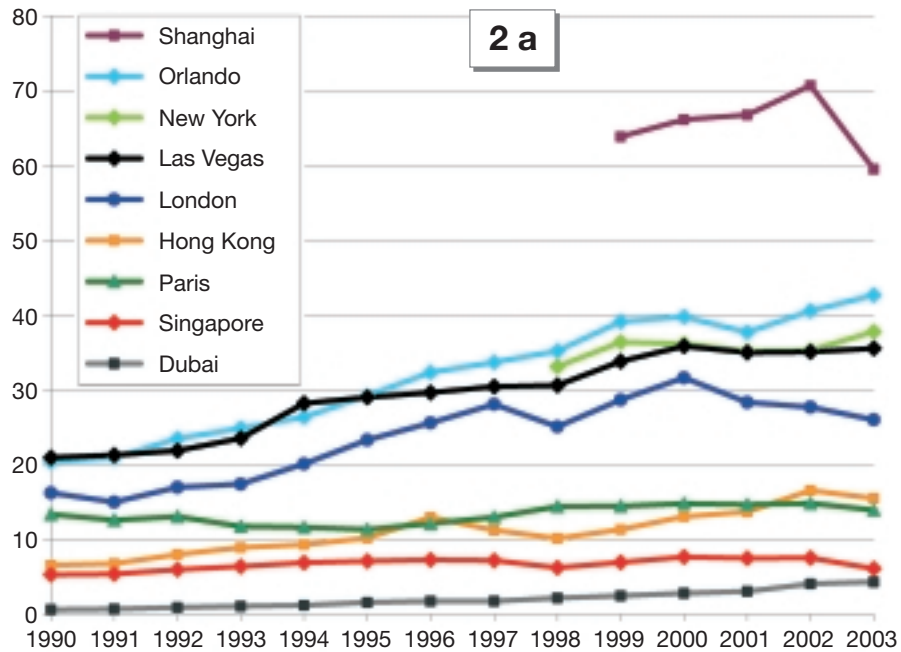


Fig. 2a: Development of tourism figures in selected destinations since 1990 (in millions)
 Entwicklung der Touristenzahlen in ausgewählten Destinationen seit 1990 (in Millionen)

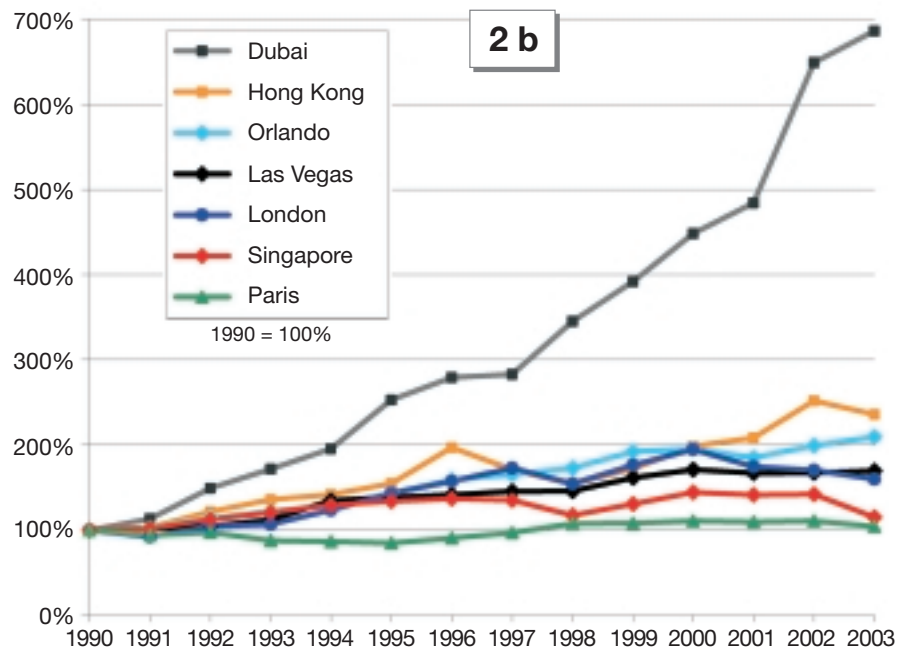


Fig. 2b: Growth rates of tourism figures in selected destinations since 1990
 Prozentuales Wachstum der Touristenzahlen in ausgewählten Destinationen seit 1990

Source: DUBAI MUNICIPALITY 2004; EUROPEAN CITIES TOURISM 2004; HONG KONG TOURISM BOARD 2004; LAS VEGAS CONVENTION AND VISITORS AUTHORITY 2005; MUNICIPAL STATISTICAL BUREAU OF SHANGHAI 2004; NYC AND COMPANY 2005; ORLANDO CONVENTION AND VISITOR BUREAU 2004; SINGAPORE TOURISM BOARD 2004

has also profited from Arab investments and a repatriation of Arab funds from the U.S. market. Accordingly, the projected or already executed investments in the entire real estate and infrastructure sector in Dubai amount to more than 150 billion US dollars (RAHMAN 2005; DUBAI DEVELOPMENT AND INVESTMENT AUTHORITY 2003). Dubai so far has not only managed to lower its dependency on the oil industry to under 7%, but also to diversify its economy: trade and tourism already make up approx. 20%, real estate almost 9% of the gross domestic product (Fig. 4). In the past three decades, Dubai has had a comet like rise and undergone a transition from a small trading town on the Persian Gulf to a booming tourist and economic metropolis – similar to a “Hong Kong of the Middle East” (LAVERGNE a. DUMORTIER 2000; WIRTH 1988).

In the light of this development public space has become rare, in Dubai as well as in other “fully commercialised” major cities (DAVIS 1999; LIGHT 1999; SORKIN 1992). The exclusive entertainment worlds and hotel landscapes are taking up more and more space, so that meanwhile in Dubai, as in many other areas, unlimited access to the beaches and the sea has become very restricted. In cities like Dubai and Las Vegas the private tourism and real estate sector increasingly dominate urban planning. The rapid growth leaves the financially overtaxed and undermanned public authorities not much choice in the matter. Public tasks and functions are given either to public-private-partnerships or entirely to private care (cf. PIERRE 2001; HEALEY et al. 2002; IMRIE a. RACO 1999). Due to the pressure of the rapid development, however, these “privatised” and artificially themed cities are threatened with being divided up into many isolated worlds of everyday life. In the end, not only does the world of everyday life seem to be eclipsed by artificial leisure worlds, but also gives way to a fragmented spatial and social mosaic.

The normative valuation of consequences such as fragmentation or loss of public space is not at the core of the academic discussion about themed cities. The main focus is rather the analysis of the most important mechanisms that provide the necessary understanding, as well as enabling a public debate on the development and consequences of artificially produced urban landscapes.

³⁾ The construction on the 250 islands of the project “The World” will be built in the style of the country they represent. The diving quarters around the already completed Palm Jumeirah will depict, complete with flora and fauna, all of the world’s famous diving areas from the Caribbean and the Red Sea to Australia’s Great Barrier Reef.

3 “Economy of Fascination” as a research perspective

For an analytical understanding of commercialisation, theming, and entertainment orientation, a clearly defined research perspective is necessary and will be developed and conceptualised in this section. Using an “Economy of Fascination”, semiotic and experience aspects are taken up and linked to the overall economic context. Against the background of an action theory, the economic intentions of investors, planners, and operators on the one hand and the emotional ties and receptions of consumers and visitors on the other will be analysed. The examination of the effectiveness of entertainment and theming will therefore be the focus of this research perspective.

Following the “Economy of Attention” as postulated by FRANCK (1998) the “Economy of Fascination” begins by analysing the basic mechanisms of “attention” and “fascination”. According to FRANCK, “attention” in the media age is a scarce resource and seen as a form of income and an alternative currency in close competition with monetary means of payment. In its true sense of the word, FRANCK (1998, 30) defines attention as “the capacity for selective information processing” and emphasises the cognitive process of the selection of information. For its economic use, the generation of attention is crucial. The battle over audience rating and circulation is thus reflected in the battle over attention. Since attention cannot be expanded and intensified to an unlimited extent, this is where the problem of economic utilisation lies. The ongoing demand for consumption of information inevitably leads to overstimulation. The positive connotation of information is reversed, with the information excess turning into a sensation of perceptual stress: “Too much of the new becomes a nuisance when the selection of what is truly important becomes a strain” (FRANCK 1998, 61).

Three basic consequences characterise this overstimulation: first, the additional information leads to a professionalised approach for targeted stimulation and manipulation of attention. Gaining mass attention has long since become a bulk business, not only for the advertising industry. Today, artificial attention for any kind of content or product can be generated with calculable success (FRANCK 1998). Secondly, the actual information as well as the material and functional aspects are forced to take a back seat. Due to the growing pressure of competition, emotional and symbolic ascriptions are required more and more. This leads to a real de-materialisation of things as well as to an increase in the production of emotionalised symbols (LASH a. URRY 2002; BAUDRILLARD 1978, 1988). Thirdly, a consequence of this development for the consumer of in-



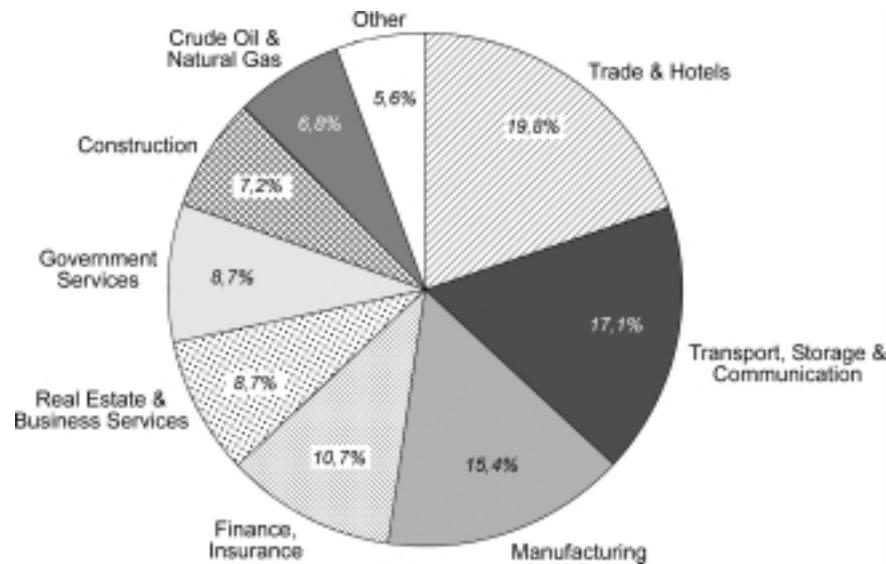


Fig. 4: Gross domestic product by sectors in the Emirate of Dubai 2003

Bruttoinlandsprodukt nach Sektoren im Emirat Dubai 2003

Source: DUBAI MUNICIPALITY (2004), modified

formation is the development of a “fascination” dependency. Consumption and perception are hardly possible without show effects and artificial exaggeration while trivial, non-stage-managed reality equally loses its attractiveness. Our attention is constantly being roused by attractions and stage-managed events so that it is almost impossible to get away from them. We are so fascinated, magnetised, and captivated by the resourceful manipulation of information stimuli that, partly subconsciously, partly helplessly, we give ourselves over to the compulsion of perception and the consumption of experiences.

The last-mentioned aspect of the fascination tie, that of dependence through fascination, is central to the “Economy of Fascination”. In contrast to “attention” the term “fascination” builds less on the capacity of selective information processing but more on its potential of dependency. Fascination rather describes the powerlessness and the dependency of the consumer when it comes to themed productions. Fascination implies a kind of compulsion of attention, a magical gravitational force, and – in the true sense of the word – a captive effect through its cleverly conveyed choice of information. For the main thesis of an “Economy of Fascination” the most important question therefore concerns the nature of magic and the mechanism of fascination. An answer is chiefly found on the semiotic level and thus depends on an understanding of the signs and symbols⁴⁾ used.

Symbols play a key role when it comes to generating attention. Since they are activated through emotional ties the entertainment industry very often adopts already established symbols and parts of these. The consumer experiences this as a *déjà-vu* (BREUER 1998): things already known are re-recognised and characteristics as well as experiences related to them are projected onto the new situation. Beside such effects of recognition the appeal of the unknown is of similar importance. With the motto “What is exotic sells” the consumer’s curiosity for the unknown is used. Everything exotic automatically stands out from other information and draws the consumer’s attention. Yet combining these two effects is even more efficient: the unfamiliar is presented together with the familiar and, best of all, in

⁴⁾ The term “symbol” in a wide sense is often used as a synonym for the term “sign”. In a stricter semiotic sense “symbol” however belongs to a sub-category of signs and is defined as a conventional sign, as a iconic (pictorial) sign or as a connotation (secondary meaning) (NÖTH 2000). In this paper the term “symbol” will be used in connection with visualisation and iconic signs. A symbol is understood here, in turning to HEGEL’s aesthetics as “a sign, which in its externality comprises in itself at the same time the content of the idea which it brings into appearance” (HEGEL 1975, 305). In using the term “symbol” it is intended at the same time to emphasize the expansion of semiotics into non-verbal fields, especially as done by BARTHES (1988) and ECO (1972).

a known and “safe” surrounding. The déjà-vu effect then lets the fascinating unfamiliar seem familiar and calculable. Ultimately, the feature is “sanitised” and freed from all unpleasant qualities (EBERT 1998). Original content is often omitted and only *re*-presented and hinted at through symbols.

This is exactly where the opportunities for conscious transformation and manipulation of symbols and representations appear. The key to success lies in presenting the feature in an entertaining manner. The producers of entertainment worlds and the media consciously make references to various models through symbols. But for the sake of the entertainment industry the references and symbols are re-interpreted, transformed, and often extended by a mystical aura. References to the original are frequently left unclear which then enhances the „mystical” character of the unfamiliar and leads to a tension between unambiguity and secrecy (NÖTH 2000; CHARAUDEAU 1983). We are therefore not only looking at re-presentations but at new presentations. Designers, scriptwriters, and decorators deliberately create new symbols purely for the sake of entertainment – either turning to fragments of already known representations or to absolutely newly-created products. If an artificially generated sign or symbol is repeated often enough, it is finally imprinted, like a constantly advertised brand, and establishes itself on the market. These symbols are conveyed through the media rather than socially, like the fairy-tale castle of Disneyland, which plays on the fantasy of the audience but is pre-programmed in its interpretation and association.⁵⁾

For the research approach of an “Economy of Fascination” these thoughts lead to two decisive guidelines: on the one hand the mechanisms of generating entertainment can mainly be explained on a semiotic level. The analysis of the ascription and association of meaning therefore turns to a perspective of a theory of signs which includes sign production as well as sign reception. On the other hand it requires an overall integration in the economic context, which must be seen as the driving force of entertainment orientation and theming. This second guideline must also provide an understanding of the transformation of urban landscapes into theme worlds, thus incorporating aspects of urban governance as well as political and economic action. With reference to the “theory of structuration” by ANTHONY GIDDENS (1984) and the „social geogra-

phy of everyday regionalisations” by BENNO WERLEN (1995, 1997) a perspective of action theory particularly lends itself to the question at hand. In addition to examining the most important political and economic protagonists the focus will be on the analysis of the intentions, strategies, and ways of acting. The elaboration of an „Economy of Fascination” as a perspective for research thus calls for a combination and reciprocal incorporation of semiotic as well as action theory approaches.⁶⁾ Both approaches offer suitable contact points.

3.1 Theory of symbolic consumption as a semiotic guideline

The mediation of meaning in the context of an “Economy of Fascination” can be analysed very well by a theory of symbolic consumption (HOLBROOK a. HIRSCHMAN 1993). The approach conceptualises a number of different strategies of sign utilisation, but also focuses on the mechanisms of resemanticisation, such as shifts in meaning or transformations of signs (cf. HOLBROOK a. HIRSCHMAN 1993; FIRAT a. DHOLAKIA 1998). On the one hand signs and messages about goods (text and visual semiotic) will be focused on, but also goods as signs themselves (semiotic of goods). Accordingly, the theory of symbolic consumption includes the supplier side as well as the consumer side and conceives selling, buying, and consumption of products as a form of symbolic action (NÖTH 2000). An analysis is made, for example, of how consumers use products to signal a certain status or to express a certain life-style (HOLMAN 1981; HIRSCHMAN a. HOLBROOK 1981).

Beyond this, the different strategies of hiding, manipulating, and seducing are analysed: ECO (1972) for instance speaks of a visual rhetoric of advertising and emphasises the persuasive message as well as the visual code. On the basis of a semiotic theory of connotation BARTHES (1988, 1990) also reflects on the rhetoric of advertising as a form of expression but emphasises the hidden ideological content of the advertising message, which is hidden in the connotation and therefore in the subordinate meaning of the advertising signs. VOLLI (2002) verifies the advertising meaning of connotations but also refers to the possibility of real connotation chains, in which the original meaning is constantly being replaced by new meanings. In that way advertisements can imply indirect value judgements and associations extending far beyond the original meaning of an applied sign.

⁵⁾ The Disney castles exemplifies that via a déjà-vu it can borrow from a classic fairy tale while at the same time, creating and presenting the real symbols anew in order to be able to use them for economic purposes.

⁶⁾ SAHR (1998), MAI (1998) or DICKHARDT (2000) have already combined semiotic and action theory approaches.

CHARAUDEAU (1983) also points to the dialectic of hiding and seducing in his “stratégie d’occultation” and “stratégie de séduction/persuasion”. As a characteristic of masquerading, CHARAUDEAU emphasises the discursive strategy of mystification, letting the advertised product seem magical and imaginative while hiding the actual narrative deep structure of the advertising message. Such strategies of masquerading and mystification are already in the process of becoming so-called resemanticisations, by which the meaning of the signs is remodelled or “charged” with new meanings. Manipulations of this kind can often be found in marketing, for example when talking about aestheticization or the promise of a practical value of consumer goods (NÖTH 2000; WILLIS 1991). This kind of economically intended shift in meaning is considerably facilitated through accelerated cycles of semiotic reproduction. In the age of (post)industrial consumer society, everyday sign systems are continuously being transformed and developed anyway. Consumer goods are not only reinterpreted into signs and brands but they also undergo ever faster transformations in accordance with the latest (consumption) trends (NÖTH 1988, 2000).

These strategies are clearly visible in Dubai and Las Vegas and can be analysed in the framework of the theory of symbolic consumption. In Dubai, for example, the Burj al-Arab, which rises off the coast in the shape of a full-blown sail as the world’s tallest and most luxurious hotel, has an outstanding meaning. Apart from the visual symbolism, which refers to the local tradition of seafarers (or pirates?), it is most notably the interior, decorated with gold and marble that makes the hotel a symbol of uniqueness. Today’s meaning of the Burj al-Arab goes far beyond the original association of luxury and wealth, however, and adeptly uses the strategies of mystification and masquerading. The Burj al-Arab has experienced an oriental mystification by linking together many association chains as well as smartly connecting other symbols that make it appear as a symbol of the fairytale oil wealth of the Gulf emirates, but also as a fragment of the stories from 1001 Nights.⁷⁾ In the meantime, the hotel itself has advanced to become a trademark and symbol for Dubai and serves as a perfect iconic symbol for tourist advertising (Photo 3).

⁷⁾ Examples of semiotic connections can be seen not only in the Rolls Royces parked in front of the hotel, the exclusive arrival with a helicopter on the helipad of the Burj al-Arab, or the combination of golf and yachting but particularly in the oriental stereotypes such as palm trees, oases, sand dunes, and camels, as well as souks and Bedouin tents.

Another good example of masquerading and mystification is the Hotel Venetian in Las Vegas. As a theme hotel, it automatically accesses a whole line of impressions that are associated with the Italian city of canals, Venice. These connections are not only made through scale reproductions of the Doge’s Palace or the Rialto Bridge but especially through theatrical productions, such as the carnival in Venice, a gondola ride including a sung aria or with trained pigeons on the covered St. Mark’s Square. The goal is not necessarily an exact replica – but rather a perfect production and mystification. The Venetian symbols used, therefore have undergone a decisive resemanticisation, serving an economic utilisation and omitting all negative associations. Security and hygiene play an important role and are created through skilful symbolic integration. Instead of pickpockets, there are security guards in Carabinieri uniforms, and chlorinated water in the blue canals replaces the sometimes atrocious smell of the original lagoon.

In Las Vegas and Dubai the suggested theory of symbolic consumption enables a detailed analysis of the generation of experiences on the consumer and on the supplier side. The integration in the overall context and the analysis of intentions, strategies, and ways of action can be organised by an approach of action theory. With such a combined conceptualisation, entertainment orientation and commercialisation in the course of urban governance can be grasped and explained much better than by semiotic approaches alone.

3.2 *Informative-significative geographies of everyday life as an action theory guideline*

BENNO WERLEN’s considerations on “informative-significative geographies of everyday life” hold a key position in the combination of semiotic and action theory approaches. These ideas deal with emotionally meaningful ascriptions and the underlying relations of communication in the context of an action oriented “social geography of everyday regionalisations” (WERLEN 1997, 2000). WERLEN’s approach is divided into the fields of *geographies of information* and *geographies of symbolic appropriation*. The geographies of information refer to the conditions of the constitution of meaning and focus on the production and reproduction of information on the part of sender and receiver. The geographies of symbolic appropriation are directed at the original constitution of meaning and include subjective assignments of meaning as well as meaningful appropriations (WERLEN 2000). For WERLEN the constitution of meaning is dependent on the knowledge available.

Thus the reconstruction of meaningful ascription first needs to be based on the subjectively available information and stock of knowledge. A descriptive analytical piece of research would first have to register the institutions involved in the transfer of information, reconstruct the actual subjective references to the flow of information, and then turn to reconstructing the different forms of ascription. An explicative research has to analyse the allocative and authoritative resources on the side of the sender in the form of ownership and disposition (geography of information) and has to reconstruct the symbolic appropriation and especially the rules of interpretation (geography of symbolic appropriation) (WERLEN 1997, 385 et seq.).

The generation of information, as well as the reception of information as a basis of the constitution of meaning, is identified by WERLEN (1997) as an active process of action. Accordingly, it is increasingly the media that actively create social reality by selecting, evaluating, and interpreting social events. Thus the media structure the reception of information of individuals. Yet before an action-relevant adaptation takes place, a selective reference to the flow of information is made (cf. *economy of attention*), and the information received through the media is processed. It is only on this basis that the “symbolic appropriations on which the geographies of signification rest” occur (WERLEN 1997, 391).

The information transmitted by the media becomes more important than the individual’s own or the socially transmitted experiences. They are increasingly structuring the meaningful interpretation of the contexts of action and thus the symbolic geography-making (WERLEN 1997). The media thereby hold an extraordinarily large potential for structuring, which, through the transmitted norms and schemes of interpretation, creates inter-subjective structures of meaning and influences the action of individuals (GIDDENS 1984).

The schemes of interpretation play a crucial part for the research on geographies of symbolic appropriation. They are to be “understood as a set of semantic rules in the dimension of constraining the signification” and “allow the subject to experience the interpretation of the social and cultural world as a meaningful reality” (WERLEN 1997, 403). Schemes of interpretation embody structural rules of interpretation and reveal particular directions of interpretation. They constrain the ascription of meaning of individuals. In accordance with GIDDENS’ (1984) duality of structure the schemes of interpretation are not only constraining, but must always be understood as the outcome of social practices and actions. This means that schemes of interpretation

on the one hand cause the assignments of meaning of the recipient, but at the same time are the outcome of earlier practices of ascription. “The action and structuration orientated semantics assume that the meanings of words and other mediums are ‘constituted’ in rule-guided activities. The meaning of ‘things’ is the result and expression of practical appropriation.” (WERLEN 1997, 402). In this respect the structuring of meaning takes place through everyday practices against the background of subjective experiences or experiences transmitted in face-to-face situations, yet to an increasing degree also by ascriptions of meaning that are communicated by the media and that can be the result of economically intended manipulation and resemantisation.

Schemes and rules of interpretation are the crucial key for an economic utilisation. With an economic intention they are decisively influenced by the entertainment industry and conveyed by the media. Finally to examine the most important mechanisms of the constitution of symbols and experiences it is necessary to analyse the individuals involved, their intentions and respective action strategies. By the informative-significative geographies of everyday life one cannot only link up to the theory of symbolic consumption but through the approach of action theory can also place the findings in the overall context. Analysing the protagonists and their actions at the same time identifies and illustrates tendencies of a growing commercialisation and entertainment orientation. The approach of action theory therefore is the crucial link between the semiotic aspects and the overall economic development. Only by this approach can the semiotic phenomena and the emergence of artificial urban landscapes as well as processes of fragmentation and segregation be analytically cross-referenced.

In Dubai, the analysis of the various protagonists as well as their intentions and strategies brings to light a network of different groupings. State, semi-state, and private protagonists complement and support each other in the production of symbols and the destination management. If Emirates Airline, for example, expands its route network, at the new flight destination the state-run Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing will organise a massive public-relations campaign, the private hotel group Jumeirah will woo tourists, and the private real estate companies Nakheel (Island projects) and Emaar (Burj Dubai) will court investors. Apart from obvious economic interests, it is mainly Emir Sheikh Mohammad’s vision to turn Dubai into a leading hub for business, commerce, and tourism that is the driving force behind these activities. At the same time, the economically-orientated state policy



Photo 3: A game of Tennis played on the helipad of the Burj al-Arab
Tennispiel auf der Hubschrauberplattform des Burj al-Arab

Outside the ATP tennis tournament in Dubai Roger Federer and Andre Agassi faced off in a friendly match in February 2005 on the lofty heights of the Burj al-Arab. The event enabled Dubai once again to hit the world headlines. It was a massive success in drawing attention and resulted in world-wide advertising for Dubai.

Source: Getty Images 2005

leads to the privatisation of public tasks and is turning Dubai into a typical example of urban governance. It is only against this background of privatisation and commercialisation that the massive international campaign to gain attention for the up-and-coming business destination Dubai can be understood. The permanent penetration with symbolic ascriptions is supposed to provide a positive image and the necessary investors and tourists. Semiotic aspects are implemented with economic intentions as powerful marketing and attention strategies, as seen in the slogan and wordplay from Nakheel: “The Palm puts Dubai on the Map – The World puts the Map on Dubai.”

While Sheikh Mohammed, as ruler, economic leader and entrepreneur is the driving force in Dubai, in Las Vegas the different gambling and entertainment corporations play the major role. Although there is a fierce competition among the corporations and a strong process of market concentration with several mega-mergers in the past two years, the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority (LVCVA) is the unifying and driving force for a coordinated destination management. Organised as a public-private-partnership the LVCVA receives a good portion of the hotel room tax revenues, which constitutes most of its 230 million dollar annual budget. These resources enable the LVCVA not only to “lose” money by the operation of the con-

vention centre (which creates a considerable amount of business for the hotel industry), but also to spend more than 120 million dollars per year on marketing and advertising. The success of Las Vegas, however, is not only dependent on the amount of money spent on advertising, but by the way the LVCVA promotes the destination: in 2003 LVCVA launched a new advertising campaign called “Vegas Stories”, which is marketing Las Vegas as a destination only for adults and a place where nearly everything is possible. The advertising slogan “What happens here, stays here” underlines the mystification of the destination as an “adult playground” and has become a true pop culture sensation.⁸⁾ In the end LVCVA has been able to successfully combine a mystification of the destination with the necessary cooperation among the participants, both of the private and the public sectors.

Without the media, however, the development in Dubai and Las Vegas would hardly be possible. It is TV networks especially, such as Al-Arabia in Dubai or NBC in the U.S., that serve as multipliers and transport

⁸⁾ “What happens here, stays here” means something like “will be kept as a secret” and was used as a saying by many prominent persons like First Lady Laura Bush, Ben Affleck or Jay Leno.

the reproduced symbols and schemes of interpretation created by the entertainment industry. By this, the media enter into a kind of symbiosis. On the one hand, they offer their function as a multiplier, but on the other hand the media benefits from the spectacular productions they report on and through which they receive higher audience ratings. The decision-makers of the leisure worlds deliberately direct their themings and productions towards the commercial interest of the media, as seen most recently in the tennis game on top of the Burj al-Arab when the media gratefully carried the event (Photo 3). The media therefore cannot be seen as an abstract figure or independent protagonists in the process of entertainment, but are often closely embedded in the action network of the entertainment orientation. For that reason research not only has to analyse the structures of ownership and disposition on the side of the media, but also the medial processes that, for example, have transformed the Burj al-Arab into a media icon.

4 Conclusion

Both examples, Dubai and Las Vegas, serve as a starting point for the development of the approach of an “Economy of Fascination”. In this paper, however, the guideline developed is applied to both cities simply in an exemplary way so that a detailed analysis is left to a further study. Correspondingly, the following research questions are to be answered under the keyword of an “Economy of Fascination”: all processes first need to be analysed which on an overall economic scale have an effect on establishing and marketing artificial entertainment, shopping, and leisure worlds. Here, the study is centred around the analysis of structural elements such as structures of ownership and disposition of entertainment and media institutions but also schemes of interpretation, contextualisation, and sign and symbol systems employed. Based on this, it is possible to examine the corresponding strategies for the generation of experiences and, above all, attention and fascination. It is essential to reconstruct the symbolic ascriptions, register the public-relation strategies but also to analyse the symbolic appropriation and identifications on the side of the consumer in order to explain actions of consumption.

The combination of action theory and semiotic perspective demonstrated here allows not only an understanding of the economic strategies of action of investors, planners, and operators of themed shopping and leisure worlds, but also the reconstruction of the reception of meaning and decisions of consumption

on the consumer side. Following the guideline of an “Economy of Fascination” one can examine the mechanisms of produced and themed entertainment, shopping, and leisure worlds, analyse the processes of an increasing entertainment orientation and commercialisation, and find an explanatory approach for the increased theming of urban landscapes.

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