



## Amanda Levete

What Dennis Hopper told Amanda Levete and other Vegas stories, plus the secret story of Wembley's image rights

### 'Relax, babe'

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At a recent post-Wembley dinner hosted by the Architecture Foundation, one of the rumours doing the rounds was that the World Stadium Team, better known as Foster + Partners and [HOK](#), had inserted into their appointment a clause giving them the right to use images of Wembley.

Well, I did a bit of digging. So great was the urgency at the time to sign everyone up and so great was the complexity of the Wembley contracts that transit vans were hired to transport them between lawyers. I can only guess that this small but potentially lucrative or damaging clause (depending on which side you were on) might have escaped beady legal eyes.

Although I am sure neither office has any intention of enforcing this right, I tried something similar once – without success – so I do have some admiration for their attempted coup.

All this started me thinking about ownership and authorship. Architecture is the most overwhelming of cultural forms and it is a huge privilege to work in this arena.

By and large, we are rewarded fairly in our profession both financially and in terms of fulfilment. You own the intellectual copyright, but as we all know it is almost impossible to enforce this. We must hold onto owning our ideas – without the idea there is nothing – but surely not the spin-off from that idea.

In my view, when you create a significant piece of architecture, it becomes a part of the public realm regardless of whether it is a public building or not. As it happens, last week, I was defending the merits of Wren over Foster for the BBC. Just imagine what might have happened if Wren had secured image rights to St Paul's.

On a different subject, I have been asked to look at designing an art museum in Las Vegas. Art and architecture do not sit easily in Vegas. We are talking about a city that replaced Rem Koolhaas' Guggenheim museum with a theatre showing Phantom of the Opera, a city that bulldozes theme parks to make way for more casinos and strip joints. Vegas is a case study in the lessons of pleasure; a city built on fantasy and human frailty. But you turn your back on what makes Vegas tick at your peril.

The art of Vegas lies in providing the clues that allow people to build up their fantasies. The city is a display of enticement and illusion so you have to find a way of making art spaces work within this context of pleasure. And yet Vegas is a deeply serious place in terms of property values and financial returns. It is the fastest-growing city in America with 7,000 new residents a month, lured by the promise of neverending work. Fifteen out of 20 of the world's largest hotels are in Vegas, with weekend occupancy at a staggering 95%.

“So long as you don't gamble, you have to love Vegas,” said Dennis. I told him I found it apocalyptic, hell on earth”

My site is downtown, not on the Strip, so I was concerned there might not be enough critical mass but I was then told the Fremont Street experience, just a few yards away, attracts 21 million visitors a year. The challenge therefore is finding a way to tap into the desires of all those people.

In Vegas the lines between irony, kitsch and criticism are blurred, but it operates according to the rules of its own system, which makes the rules of architecture different by default. The architecture of communication is dominant, the architecture of space comes second. It demands a different way of looking at things, in particular the pumped-up visuality of the facade and the fact that the night experience carries more meaning than the experience by day. Making an impact is imperative. You have to compete for attention – that is just the way the city is constructed. Being noticed is what matters in Vegas, but at the same time I want to do a serious piece of work.

On the way home, I was asked when I'd be going back. Not until the museum opens, I thought to myself. But that was wrong. There are lessons to be learned from Vegas and not just of an architectural nature. The other day I sat next to Dennis Hopper at dinner so I asked him, as an American and someone who has a deep knowledge of the art scene, what he thought about the notion of an art museum in Vegas. I didn't realise he was president of the CineVegas Film Festival and so knows the town intimately.

"So long as you don't gamble, you have to love Vegas," he said. "You can eat very well very cheaply, the hotel rooms are huge and a fraction of the price in Europe and every brand you can imagine is there."

I told him I found it apocalyptic, like hell on earth.

"Relax, babe, if you can't love Vegas for a few days then something is wrong."

And you know what, he is probably right.

Postscript :

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