CRITICAL gambling studies

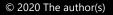Book review: Kah-Wee, Lee. (2019). Las Vegas in Singapore: Violence, Progress and the Crisis of Nationalist Modernity. Singapore: NUS Press. 35.59 Can$. ISBN# 978-981-47-2290-2 (paperback).

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Book review

Kah-Wee, Lee. (2019). *Las Vegas in Singapore: Violence, Progress and the Crisis of Nationalist Modernity*. **Singapore: NUS Press. 35.59 Can$. ISBN# 978-981-47-2290-2 (paperback).**

Kah Wee Lee is an assistant professor in the Department of Architecture, at the School of Design and Environment in the National University of Singapore. The book is based on his PhD dissertation, "Las Vegas in Singapore: Casinos, Modernity and the Taming of Vice" (University of California, Berkeley). It focuses on the architectural, urban and juridical histories of the criminalization and regulation of gambling in Singapore and explores the role of gambling in Singapore, from colonial times to the post-independence period. In 2005, Singapore's government decided to legalize two casino developments using a new "integrated resorts" business model; one casino was on the tourist island of Sentosa, and the other on the urban waterfront of Marina Bay (p. 1). As Lee explains, the developer Sheldon Adelson had very limited creative freedom at Marina Bay. In that case, the government ensured that the casino space itself was directly hidden, on the principle of "zero visibility," within the iconic building designed by architect Moshe Safdie.

The book proceeds with a critique based upon French philosopher Michael Foucault's genealogical approach: "not by seeking solace or origins in the past, but by returning to moments of crises where such interventions were neither self-evident nor familiar" (p. 5) and is divided into two interconnected parts. In Part I "City of Violence" (p. 27 - 147), Lee explores how the

increasing criminalization of vice from the colonial to the post-independence periods shaped the urban landscape and the everyday lives of Singaporeans, especially in regard to gambling. The first chapter identifies critical moments when the moral and legal status of gambling changed, and analyses the Common Gaming Houses Ordinance of the colonial period in relation to juridical cases, legal procedures and police actions. Lee also explains the reason for revising the Common Gaming Houses Ordinance to provide expanded powers in 1888, how the Wai Seng lottery grew, and the development of critical forensics (e.g., fingerprints).

In the second chapter, Lee discusses revisions of anti-gambling laws, including raising penalties, easier prosecution, expanding illegality and the associated effects on society in the 1950s to 1970s. He covers schoolchildren's exposure to gambling, specifically called "tikam tikam" (p.84), and the "Characters lottery" and "Chap-ji-kee" which were directed at gullible housewives (p. 88). In chapter three, Lee shifts to the underground economy by examining the social and economic functions of gambling. He extensively uses oral histories of ex-residents of Chinatown and provides their stories about how the games were played and operated. Lee demonstrates the economic functions of gambling by discussing how an association with gambling games raised the profile and profitability of

commercial businesses. Then he provides details about the functions of gambling houses in Singapore during the mid-twentieth century. Chapter four focuses on the national lottery after the beginning of construction of the National Stadium. Lee describes the national lottery as a symbolic transition of money, which was said to turn "bad" money into "good" money. He calls this "moral laundering" (p. 144).

Part 2 "City of Progress" (p. 149 - 246) has three chapters and directly focuses on the Las Vegas model of casino gambling and its introduction to Singapore. Lee addresses the following questions: How did the Las Vegas model for casinos become safe for Singapore? Or did it? In chapter five, the "quantitative turn" (p. 150) is examined in terms of how digital technology and corporate culture were used to create a new gambling experience. Lee also explores how new technologies promised a way to understand individual player habits that could be used to customize and design slot machines, and how the tactics of gamblers were mirrored and utilized.

Chapter six focuses on casino architecture and casino design as a sub-profession in Las Vegas (p. 181). Lee analyzes several Las Vegas casinos' architectural plans. The Las Vegas architectural model features an indivisible core consisting of the porte cochère, casino and hotel lobby. His close analysis of casino-resort plans explains two architectural strategies used in Las Vegas during the mid-1950s (p.183 - 185). First, the strategy of distribution rationalizes gamblers and hotel guests as distinct groups and separates them at their moment of entry. The second strategy is 'accumulation places'; he gives an example of the placement of the night club at the far end of the space, which is designed to force visitors to travel through the gambling area in order to enter it. In another example, Lee explains that service and resting areas, such as restaurants and coffee shops, are distributed along the perimeter such that they remain close but unobtrusive to the central activity of

gambling. Later in this chapter, Lee shares interview data to discuss design principles (e.g., slot machines should not be placed more than five in a row) that are still in operation today. Finally, in the last chapter Lee explains how the Las Vegas Model in Singapore was slowly transformed by focusing on the key actors-politicians, government planners, bureaucrats, developers and architects.

This book will certainly be useful to those who are interested in socio-cultural, political, architectural and legal histories of gambling, and/or in casino developments. It clarifies and deepens our understanding of relatively uncommonly explored aspects of gambling by focusing on cultural values and stories, both historical and contemporary. Since gambling studies are mostly conducted within the disciplines of neuroscience, psychology and psychiatry, Lee (who is from an architecture department) offers a unique approach. He explains the relatively unknown sub-profession of casino design, interviews casino designers and accesses fascinating archival materials related to gambling in Singapore. He also looks back in history to the colonial period while analyzing the contemporary politics involved in making the Integrated Resort. The book will be a good reference and a useful stimulus for thinking about the role of the built environment in gambling among researchers in the social sciences and humanities.

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