

Allegories of Virtues and Vice

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The studio engaged recent debates on state-run gambling casinos, coastal reclamation, and the rituals of tourism. Efforts were coordinated with peers in critically related disciplines, the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio, and the city of Biloxi, Mississippi.

Gambling casinos are a microscopic magnification of capital based on the proceeds of chance and luck. We sought ways to harness the processes of casino gambling and respond to the challenges of fragile environments that, like gaming, evolve via the intersecting complexities of contingency, risk, and instability. Situating the casino in a natural environment requiring remediation addressed the program and building type that produces a kind of “non-place,” like the superstore, airport, and hotel identified by Marc Augé in *Non-Places* as spaces of circulation, consumption, and communication which suspend time and are “beyond history.”

Augé associates the non-place with a partial awareness, or incoherence, caused by the excess of space (“spatial overabundance”). The psychological condition of the solitary individual in the city is discussed in the *Arcades* project, where Walter Benjamin speaks of the characteristic “‘futility, the emptiness, the inability to complete something’ which connects the gambler to the machine laborer: Gambling in fact contains the modern workers gestures...the jolt in the movement of the machine is the so-called coup in a game of chance.” (Buck-Morss, 1986) It is the reflexive relationship to the machine that connects the two figures of modern urban life.

Gambling has been viewed as a type of expenditure, along with jewels, belief sacrifice, and art, that manifests the “accursed share,” the inescapable excess in life that is destined for waste. (Bataille 1967) This wasting is what is commonly considered “luxury.” Bataille observes that like monetary waste, nature follows a similar principle of loss in the recurring “natural” catastrophes that destroy and lead to rebuilding. In light of this project, which proposes frameworks within which casinos could fund coastal reclamation, gambling would ironically become part of a donation [belief sacrifice]. The design of the gambling casino, when conceived as a means to kickstart urban and environmental loops that feed into and upon excessive, “non-productive expenditure” pinpoints the contradictions of excess and economy, effect and efficiency, structure and cosmetics, virtue and vice—i.e., sacred and profane—inherent in the global trajectory of unprecedented urban flows breaching the shores of the Gulf Coast.

A systems-thinking methodology, which embraces elements of diversity and indeterminacy, was used to construct the social and environmental life of the site. Architecture was viewed as not only immediate problem-solver but also integrator of complex systems. Students considered how built form would change over time and participate in larger natural, cultural, and infrastructural processes projected into the future. They drew upon the analytical and expressive tools of map-making to design and reveal conditions existing on the site reflecting consideration of the larger context—natural processes, circulation, tracked and projected pathways, and cycles of nature. The notion of time was incorporated through the expression of flows and diagrams of force as well as physical circulation of objects and people.

ALLEGORIES OF VIRTUE AND VICE

an ecological casino for Biloxi, Mississippi

The studio examined theories of systems and asked students to design a solution that conceived of, performed, and was critiqued as a system. How can systems aid in the reformulation of our ideas of urban infrastructure, programmatic/social relationships, public space, and site constructs? By studying models of organization that are evolutionary (Boolean networks, cellular automata, genetic algorithms, neural networks) students can be introduced to a multi-scalar and trans-disciplinary approach. Findings/learnings can be used for the design of an eco-casino that engaged recent debates on state-run gambling casinos to fund coastal reclamation funding.

The gambling casino is a microscopic magnification of systems of capital based on chance, risk, and indeterminacy. Relying on the proliferation of leisure typologies now a common urban regeneration strategy, we blurred the reductive dialectic of "saint" and "sinner," virtue and vice, to find new ways to promote social and environmental cohesion. Conceptual frameworks for intervention at the level of infrastructures and hybrid prototypes address the contradictions of economy and excess, structure and cosmetics, efficiency and effect inherent in the global trajectory of unprecedented urban flows breaching the shores of the Gulf Coast.

We live globally and work itinerantly. Yet we are not trained in design to inspect the issues that surround increased globalization as a phenomenon existing in multiple scales and layers. The collective strength of this studio lay in engaging students, professionals, and professors in pivoting formations as teams and as individuals. Efforts coordinated with peers in the critically related disciplines of landscape and planning offered opportunities for shared discourse and collaboration, and provided the interdisciplinary convergence so critical to contemporary design practice.

Georgia Tech, Mississippi State, and U. Georgia students at Gulf Coast Community Design Studio (with Director David Perkins)
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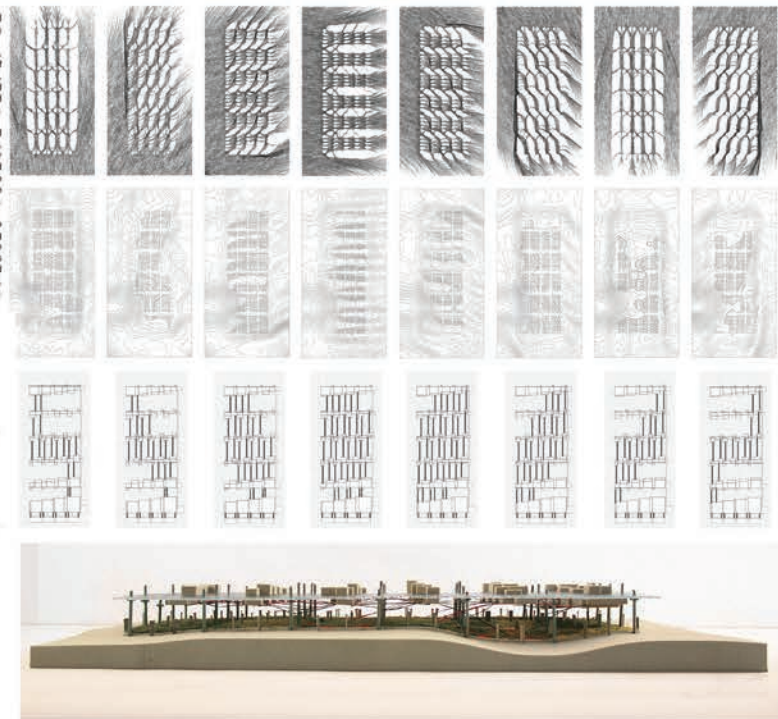
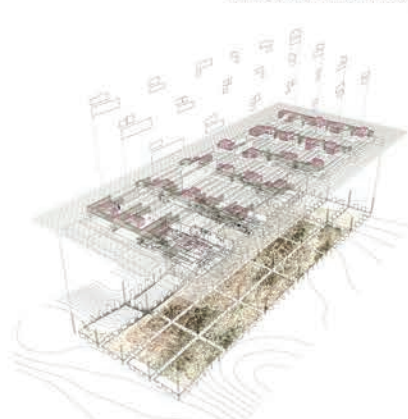


CONTINGENT CITY students: Megan McDonough and Shota Vashakmadze (4th year undergraduates, Georgia Tech)

A project for a society that doesn't exist, yet. An ecological casino on the waterfront of Biloxi, Mississippi. In a city devastated by natural and economic catastrophe, the commodity of the casino industry remains the only improbable constant. Problems of wetland restoration, economic sustainability, and gaming policy assemble into an ongoing allegory of virtue and vice. This response proposes a cooperatively owned casino, that establishes a new ground plane, and redirects the indeterminacy of weather and economy.

On a decimated wetland site that can flood most months of the year, a new economic and material ground is established. The casino, distributed among owners in subdivided parcels, is suspended from the gulf, with apartments and workstations above, over wetlands for restoration and cultivation that describe the casino's ecological after-ego. In a switchboard of circulation, following Cedric Price's notions of indeterminacy, economic flows can dictate the changes in access from casino to living spaces, while sediment flows beneath dictate the individual owner's balance between priorities of gaming and cultivation.

The vertical scheme of a plot of land, a casino, and a home plays the role of a coordinate system to their mapping operations. Described by the potential for gambling profit, shifting time scales, proximate relationships, and the mixture of slot machines and table games, the rooms of the distributed casino each articulate economic identities. The chance variables of their occupation: seasonal, operational, and superfluous, constitute a microcosm of coded and uncoded realities. Which, in conjunction with the indeterminacies of ground cultivation, shape the futures of the casino and the city.



SPONGE CITY student: Xueping Li (4th year undergraduate, Georgia Tech)

Central to the condition and planning of the city of Biloxi today are two issues: the lack of infrastructural connectivity (aside from that of the casinos) and the frequent occurrence of flooding. The Sponge City project proposes a porous and responsive landscape that restores the wetlands at the historic waterfront to absorb the impact of flooding, and generates new public spaces to encourage interaction with the wetlands. Inspired by the structural functionality of natural sponges, as well as the way organisms exhibit and/or traverse through their structures, an infrastructural prototype is introduced onto the site located on the south shore of the city. The infrastructure consists of two systems: first, a series of reservoirs of superabsorbent polymers, made of polyelectrolyte gels that are engineered to swell and absorb water up to several hundred times their dry weight. Second, a network of pipes that serve both filtration/water delivery functions as well as an overhead support scaffold that can be harnessed for future activities across the site. The casino functions are organized along three circulation flows (of both people and water): flow 1 empowers local residents that can use it as a public community space, flow 2 tracks the non-gambling travelers, and flow 3 foregrounds the gamblers. Each flow creates its own space within the casino; they intertwine at the atrium, where an indoor bayou is introduced to promote wetland/ecology awareness.

