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GEOFF SCHUMACHER: Unfinished business



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In the wake of 9/11, some otherwise sensible observers declared that humor was dead. Americans, traumatized by the terrorist attacks, would laugh no more.

It was true for a few weeks, as late-night talk show hosts canceled broadcasts and satirical publications took a breather.

But humor rose from its premature demise -- and pretty quickly at that. The dramatic proclamations proved to be sorely lacking in historical perspective and psychological insight.

Fast forward to 2009. Amid the global recession, some are predicting the decline of Las Vegas. It's fashionable right now to spotlight Las Vegas' economic woes and suggest that perhaps we've peaked. "You had a nice little run there, Las Vegas, 60 years or so of breakneck growth and glory," doomsayers are telling us. "But the party's over."

The most serious-minded articulation of this viewpoint comes from renowned urban studies professor Richard Florida, who wrote the cover story, "How the Crash Will Reshape America," in the March issue of *The Atlantic* magazine.

First, Florida's general prediction about the recession's long-range effects: "Some cities and regions will eventually spring back stronger than before. Others may never come back at all. As the crisis deepens, it will permanently and profoundly alter the country's economic landscape."

Florida believes cities and regions with high concentrations of educated and creative people are more likely to thrive in the future. "Well-educated professionals and creative workers who live together in dense ecosystems, interacting directly, generate ideas and turn them into products and services faster than talented people in other places can," he writes.

This, Florida says, bodes well for "talent-rich, fast-metabolizing places" such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. By contrast, Florida believes the places most likely to suffer are "older, manufacturing regions whose heydays are long past," such as Detroit and Cleveland.

This is fairly obvious -- the Rust Belt has been rusting for a while now -- but Florida then makes a leap that isn't so obvious. He believes the Sun Belt may decline as well.

Referring particularly to Phoenix and Las Vegas, Florida writes: "Although these places drew tourists, retirees and some industry ... much of the cities' development came from, well, development itself. At a minimum, these places will take a long, long time to regain the ground they've recently lost in local wealth and housing values. It's not unthinkable that some of them could be in for an extended period of further decline."

Florida hits the target when he says Phoenix and Las Vegas have been hammered by the bursting of the real estate bubble. We used to thrive on the "Field of Dreams" philosophy: Build it and they will come. No more. "Will people wash out of these places as fast as they washed in, leaving empty sprawl and all the ills that accompany it?" Florida asks.

Seemingly confirming Florida's reference to "empty sprawl," Forbes.com reported this week that Las Vegas leads the nation in vacant houses and apartments. It's emptier here than Detroit, which is saying something.

The empty housing is indeed alarming. But there's a key difference between Las Vegas and Detroit: Las Vegas still provides something that people want.

Florida, I believe, errs by lumping Las Vegas in with other Sun Belt cities. Las Vegas is, by most measures, unique.

"The rhythms of Las Vegas are different from those of the rest of the country," wrote the late UNLV history professor Hal Rothman. "They spring from different sources and lead to different results."

Las Vegas' reliance on a single industry does not fit with Florida's theory about the enduring value of educational and creative density and diversity. But the industry on which Las Vegas relies -- which Las Vegas basically invented -- has enduring value of its own.

Just as humor did not die in the aftermath of 9/11 -- because humor is a basic human need -- the desire for the Las Vegas experience will not die because of the current economic crisis.

Years ago, the novelist Mario Puzo reinforced this notion: "Gambling is one of the primary drives of mankind. ... Maybe we would be better off without gambling but such a thought is completely irrelevant. You can't ever get rid of gambling, and the best place to gamble is Las Vegas."

We are facing a long and deep recession. Alan Greenspan and Donald Trump both say as much, so it must be true. Las Vegas is feeling the effects more than most places, and it will take time to recover. In fact, we may never return to the heady prosperity of the recent past, when Las Vegas led the nation in growth year after year and Strip resorts thought nothing of dropping a billion dollars for a new hotel tower.

But I don't believe Las Vegas is destined for an inevitable decline. If Las Vegas employs its trademark aptitude for reinvention, customer service and affordability, if it continues to satisfy people's desires for spectacle and release, it will not only survive the recession but thrive again in its aftermath.

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