



Little Caesar's Palace



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Above: Entrance, Fame City, 1986, Pierce Goodwin Alexander Inc., architects.
Left: Video casino.

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Inside the Electronic Arcadia

Bruce C. Webb

I know we've come a long way, we're changing day to day, but tell me where do the children play? - Cat Stevens, "Where Do the Children Play?"

By its own estimation, it is "the biggest and best indoor entertainment complex in America." On the outside it looks like a postmodern television set when the power is off, an enigmatic chunk of sculpted, black glass, suggestive of potential energies lurking inside. On the inside it resembles a cross between a mixed-theme shopping mall and the City of Oz, designed perhaps for Kilgore Trout's mythical sci-fi planet of Tralfamadore. In fact, so much hype and modern mythological content converge at Fame City (Pierce Goodwin Alexander Inc., 1986), the air-conditioned kiddie-land-in-a-mall located at 13700 Beechnut on Houston's far west side, that it could serve as a kind of Rosetta Stone for life in modern America. Some future archeologist might find it useful in decoding the peculiar way language has been used to create, rather than describe, the modern world. Is it a shopping center or a casino for kiddoes? Is it a big video arcade, a bargain-basement Disneyland, or the MTV channel brought to life? Clearly it was conceived in some postmodern, commercial, never-never land where words like *biggest and best* are sounded like musical notes in a fanfare, and every place from ceramic tile stores to used-car lots can be called a "city."

Amusement parks used to deal in the experience of pure phenomena, the experience of height, of speed, of free fall, of centripetal and centrifugal forces in the abstract. To accomplish this required real movement through real space according to the principles of simple classical physics. Early amusement rides even relied on human or animal power. Switching over to machine power created no conceptual upheavals; the machine simply operated to pull you and twirl you around like super-sized horses. In some later phase, rides became thematic and, still later, as in the case of Disneyland, episodic. Emphasis on physical experience began to be matched by the psychological adventure. In Disneyland the experience occurs less in

the solar plexus than in the cerebrum. In Fame City this transformation emerges via the model of the video game as an almost complete new form of reality with its own traditions: children raised on the fables recited in the video arcades rather than on Cinderella and Mother Goose are given laser guns and sent into the blacked-out regions of the Lazer Maze rather than on a boat ride through the dreamy precincts of the enchanted forest. In the modern fairy tale it's always you against the microchip. When the barker at the Lazer Maze tells you to "shoot the robots between the eyes," the experience is supposed to be cathartic.

The look and feel of Fame City is reminiscent of a giant pinball machine where you maneuver through electrically activated amusements and diversions the way a steel ball rolls along through the electric mine field of roll-overs, spring pins, bumpers, and other gadgets. Only instead of slamming a quarter into the slot, you pause near the entrance just long enough to buy a pass. Then you turn into the midway where a grand boulevard of generically Europeanish façades lead along the food court to the pinball's backglass, a set of palatial stairs, and a neon rainbow arch on the mezzanine, the entrance to the teen club and circus room. If you have a kid in tow, you fly off like a ball fired out of the chute by the plunger spring, all that pent-up energy from the long ride out to Fame City suddenly becoming kinetic. When the kid gets wind of the electronic smells in the air (Fame City smells a bit like my old Lionel), you're off, circumnavigating your way past one amusement after another: Treasure Island, Krazy Kars, the three movie theaters, The Battle Chambers of Planet Muon, Roller City USA, and Lazer Maze. The first go-round is exploratory, getting a feel for the machine, so to speak, so you know where to spend your time. When you find yourself back at the beginning, you can fire off again, maybe this time discovering the little alley that squeezes past the Wizard's Challenge 36-hole miniature golf course leading to Flash Flight Laser Ride and Whirlyball. When your energy begins to flag, as it surely will, you gravitate back to the familiar haunts of the main street and the food court and treat yourself to ice cream, pizza, or hot dogs vended out of the first floor of the billboard buildings while you plan your next foray.

Like the rules of the video arcade, the objective of most of the attractions at Fame City is the accumulation of countless electronic points. At the aforementioned Lazer Maze an electronic tote board outside keeps a running tally

of how many robots you have shot between the eyes and compares it with the previous player's score and the best scores ever. In Flash Flight you ride around in the dark in little spaceships shooting ray guns at phantom aliens and keeping score. In Whirlyball, a clever union of bumper cars and basketball, you become a member of a team, zipping along in an electric car trying to scoop up a whiffle ball with a net on a stick that looks like a lacrosse racquet, and sending it flying through the air into a basket. And keeping score, of course. When I visited, Battle Chambers of Planet Muon was out of commission, but I think it involves shooting at things with ray guns and keeping score. New this year is Supertanks, an outdoor activity where players maneuver driveable tanks through an obstacle course, firing at other tanks. "Hits" are scored by computer.

There are some more peaceable attractions: Tiny Town, a kind of baby-sitting service (a bargain at \$3 an hour); Treasure Island, a two-story fun house for tots 48 inches or under; the roller-skating rink where you roll along against the background of a day-glo city skyline while, inexplicably, watching television on the big screens hanging overhead. Perhaps taking the concept of peaceable to the point of entropy, there is the most mind-numbing, miniature golf course conceivable. Surely miniature golf is no paragon of excitement under the happiest circumstances, but here inflated to 36 repetitious holes and played amidst the humid atmosphere of ponds and fronds of the Wizard's garden, it rivals a traffic jam for pure frustration.

In the midst of all this electro-kinetic paraphernalia, the miniature golf course is a real anachronism. It might have had a calming effect on all the youngsters frenzied by the smell of escaping electrons and the sounds of laser fire, but instead it seems to inspire both young and old to desperate acts of innovation. After the twentieth hole most kids are playing a form of street hockey and their parents are thinking of a double scotch in the Breakers bar and restaurant in the adult wing.

Fame City is something of a bargain. Parking and admission are free, which means you can wander all over the place and enjoy the air-conditioning while you puzzle over the decline of western civilization for the price of the gasoline to get there. Eleven dollars and ninety-five cents buys an unlimited-use pass to eleven activities so you can use any one of them to the point of boredom. In two visits I never saw lines like the legendary switch-backs at Disneyland or



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Clockwise from top: Interior façades of Main Street's fast-food concessions; practicing laser skills; second-floor game room window looks out onto Main Street.



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Astroworld. Kids seem to find something they enjoy and keep recycling through until they are completely satiated.

But like the free drinks and cheap meals at the Las Vegas Casino, the attractions included in the prix fixe seem to be merely warm-ups for the main action: the à-la-carte games at 25 cents a shot. The brochure calls them "a tribute to the old-fashioned carnival games of chance where winning points means winning prizes." A well-played game of Bop the Gopher or Ski Ball causes streams of tickets to issue from a slot in the machine which can be parlayed into prizes like furry, God-never-made-me-blue-colored boas, and small stuffed animals. There are also the "extended play" video games, the Fame City version of "liberal slots."

A good history of fun in America needs to be written. I think it would find that the concept of fun as it is known and practiced today – as a serious pursuit, a right, or even an obligation – is a fairly recent invention. Fun used to be taken when and where you found it. Most people did not have time for it and for those living above subsistence level, moral sanctions got in the way. Relaxation was tantamount to laziness. Charles Dudley Warner, who with Mark Twain wrote *The Gilded Age*, found Americans unfit for leisure because they applied to it "a form of serious energy used to build railroads." Because leisure fun did not belong in the American scheme of things, facilities for it were meager. And what did exist tended to appeal to rough and vulgar tastes and were socially off-limits – especially for youngsters. Somehow in our twisted cultural progress kids have gotten themselves elevated to a point of great confusion. "Geez," their parents say. "What are the kids going to do for fun this summer?" This kind of locution is what built Disneyland and after it Fame City.

Fame City answers another practical question: "What can we do special for junior's party?" Like the Hallmark Card Company that saves you from having to dig too deeply into your ingenuity by supplying poetic sentiments to fulfill your obligations to all the artificial commemorative days they have had a hand in perpetrating, Fame City caters to parties in the big room upstairs. There is a party line-up with party food and activities to fit every budget and commitment. At 11 PM on the day I was visiting, a high school group of 600 was using the facility for an all-night party.

The evolution of the shopping mall would

figure prominently in the proposed history of fun. In its short existence the enclosed mall has radically changed social life in America. Surveys show that teens and Americans in general put in more time at the mall than anywhere else except home, school, and the workplace. There were open malls in America before 1956, the year Victor Gruen succeeded in enclosing the Southgate Mall in St. Paul as a way of conquering the effects of the Minnesota winters. But the real power of the mall went far beyond the creation of the well-tempered environment. It created a sanitized version of Main Street where distractions from the world outside could be held to a minimum, if not eliminated entirely, to focus attention on the retail drama unfolding inside. The mall quickly became the place to go to pass time, the place to go when you wanted to have fun.

In 1986 the ne plus ultra of malls opened in Edmonton, Alberta. Called the West Edmonton Mall, it contains the world's largest indoor agglomeration of retail shops as well as the largest indoor water park. (These are quantitative assessments, verified by *Guinness Book of World Records*.) In addition to 11 major department stores, more than 110 eating places, and 800 other stores, the West Edmonton Mall also has several theme shopping areas, the Ice Palace skating rink, a Spanish galleon in its own lake, 4 submarines, and 37 animal displays. It also boasts the largest parking lot on earth. My own theory is that there is really only one mall in America, it's just not all connected yet. For despite the endless variations on the basic theme, all malls look pretty much the same. When you're in a mall, whether in Edmonton or Houston, you're really in neither city, but in a kind of universal, malleable, non-place realm, disconnected from context, weather, and even real time. You might as well be in outer space.

The last chapter of the proposed history of fun in America would deal with the desleazing of places of amusement, neutralizing their unsavory reputations by giving them the fresh look of...well...of a shopping mall. The American substitute for sleaze is kitsch – gaudy imitations, sensational twists, spurious recreations – things that make the unique and special into a safer consumer product through the manifold powers of cultural technology. But trying to take the sleaze out of places like carnivals and game parlors is like trying to eliminate body contact from professional football.

The mall and the video culture were made for each other, and in Fame City



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they come together to create a demonstration of what French sociologist Jean Baudrillard calls the culture of *simulacra*, a culture of empty recycling of past contents. The world inside comes to resemble the collective imagination of the middle class. At least the Victorians, when they tried to do a similar thing, left the creation of their artificial landscapes and memory palaces to the unconscionably royal rich and the true megalomaniacal crazies and their artists and architects who better understood the principle and the social value of cultural associations. Marketplace societies have always used accessibility and free choice as an excuse for the deepest corruption of values. When everything is for sale, everything is at once devalued and given a price. Everything is made ordinary and nothing is left to be fabulous. The mall creates a kind of semantic inner-sanctum, a region of meanings entirely contained in its own artificial reference system and freed from any consequences except those of its own abstract, supply-and-demand profiteering.

In the summer of 1985 the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard staged an exhibition in the Beaubourg Museum in Paris. Called "Les Immateriaux" it was the most expensive exhibition ever mounted in that museum (8 million francs, it was said). The exhibition was intended to chart the new order of our postmodern condition, but it seems to have come down to a confrontation between European intellectuals and American pop-culture, especially the kind of artificial culture which places like Fame City offer up in crash-course abundance. John Rajchman, in reviewing the Beaubourg show for *Art in America* (October 1985), wrote, "An American making his way through the 61 sites [of the show]...listening in his headset to the ponderous intonation of such 'fast metaphysics' as 'the world is a video game' might have had a wearied impression of *déjà vu*." He goes on to quote Frederick Jameson: "The ironies of international capital would have it that the great flourishing of modernist writing and theory in Paris, in which the self-centered

linguistic text was cut free from all moorings in the world, finds its sorry realization in the delirious theater of commodities and signs that is the American shopping mall."

While I was watching the action at Fame City I thought back to my visit to the Exploratorium, the innovative, hands-on science museum and workshop set inside Bernard Maybeck's old Palace of Fine Arts building in San Francisco. Kids (and adults) there were having a whole lot more real fun (and at less expense) than the kids I saw at Fame City, and learning something about science in the bargain. There was a vast room full of enticing exhibitions and demonstrations of science in the raw (the Exploratorium exhibits all look surprisingly home-made), where the goal was not to rack up electronic points but to become involved in the real phenomena of the physical world. By contrast, places like Fame City seem to confound and ultimately frustrate young minds by making the world less and less visible to them.

I spent two hours standing, sitting, walking and watching at Fame City. But it wasn't until I went up to the marketing office on the second floor to ask for a press kit that the place really began to come into focus. The woman behind the desk said all their PR stuff was on the computer and she would be happy to print it out for me if I would wait a minute. She went off, returning a few minutes later to announce in that matter-of-fact way people use to explain technological malfunctions that the computer was down. But if I left an address she would have one sent out to me in a few days. I haven't heard from her so I assume it still isn't working. Then I remembered the slot car track (Fame City 500 Raceway) where a little boy shelled out his money and waited patiently while the attendant tried out four cars before he could get one to work. There were three other rides out of commission. What if the air-conditioning went out? Technological dystopia. At least when a summer rainstorm closed down the Waterworks, the wet wonderland next door, it was an act of God.

I picked up one other "byte" of information at the marketing office. It seems the Houston Fame City is the only one in the world. Next year there will be another – in Turkey, of all places. That set me to thinking about Jameson's comment that postmodernism is the name of the strange sort of culture America spreads throughout the world and into the heavens. And wondering how the Turks will feel about using laser guns to shoot robots between the eyes. ■