Architecture of Power and Exclusion: A Theoretical Reading Focused on the Monte Carlo Casino

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1. INTRODUCTION

Monte Carlo is one of the most symbolically representative urban districts, where luxury constitutes an aesthetic narrative based on consumption practices and social distribution. It presents a device of power in which spatial order is manifested through a ritualized hierarchy. Among the significant set of symbolic elements that constitute it, the Monte Carlo Casino becomes a central structure around which an ecosystem of signs of power and status orbits. Le Casino is a building whose historical value is amplified as an architectural mechanism that delimits and distributes access, allows selective visibility, consolidates hierarchies, and integrates the symbolic meaning of the Principality's luxury. It is for this reason that the Casino becomes a main node from which mechanisms of soft exclusion and social legitimation originate. Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption (1899) becomes a key tool for understanding this phenomenon of hierarchical legitimization, since at the Monte Carlo Casino, the elites structure their consumption patterns based on their ability to project social prestige and partial visibility.

2. THE CASINO AS AN ARCHITECTURAL DEVICE OF POWER AND EXCLUSION

The Casino is a monumental Belle Époque-style building whose interior, staircases, gilded reliefs, ornaments, and gates align with Sharon Zukin's (1995) “landscapes of power,” in which aesthetics serve a structural rather than a decorative function. The physical presence of the building represents a Bourdieusian symbolic power that links the privileged groups that frequent it while organizing the urban experience of those visitors who contemplate it and constructing the aspirational nature of the temporary visitor. Its value lies simultaneously as an architectural icon, a legitimizing reference point, and a gateway for tourists who experience an aesthetic universe, norms of behavior, and ephemeral belonging to a higher status.

However, the power of the Casino is not limited to its internal dimension; its exterior, represented by the Place du Casino, functions as an urban stage presided over by Urry's (1990) “tourist gaze.” In this square, tourists observe, photograph, project, and compare, with the Casino as the backdrop for this choreography of visibility. Given that the Principality has become an attractive destination. Elite tourists seek comfort services and high-quality products, while conventional tourists seek to participate in the world of luxury as privileged observers of status rituals and, at the same time, victims of the processes of exclusion that segment them according to their purchasing power. Faced with the calculated strategy of making conventional (observer) tourism compatible with elite (participant) tourism, Monte Carlo does not present explicit barriers separating the two, but rather constitutes a system of hidden boundaries (MacCannell, 1976) in which access and circulation are regulated by symbolic barriers that suggest openness but have an implicit connotation of regulation. The Monte Carlo Casino is a paradigmatic representation of this logic.

Although the doors are open and entry to the lobby is free, the choreography of entry by uniformed staff, security checks, and the high-end valet parking system acts as a filter for visitors before they cross the physical threshold, based on the following elements:

• Elevated spaces,
• Ornate portals,
• Interior rooms with varying degrees of exclusivity,
• Visual control by staff,
• Surveillance integrated into the landscape.

This set of elements aligns with Foucault's notion of “disciplinary space” in which behaviors are ordered based on the very nature of the space. Access controls, surveillance mechanisms and implicit behavioral guidelines constitute a habitus that is not imposed but learned and replicated. This is the essence of soft exclusion: exclusion and segmentation without express prohibition.

3. THE HÔTEL DE PARIS: INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMIZATION OF PRESTIGE

Icons such as the Hôtel de Paris orbit around the Casino as the epicenter of the ecosystem of power and soft exclusion. Although this space is less theatrical than the Casino, its monumental architecture as a heritage attraction makes it a hub of institutionalized symbolic capital. Its entrance becomes a threshold of exclusion greater than that of the casino for the conventional tourist. The symbolic representation of high-end vehicles, the revolving door, marble, and gold, construct the passage from the public space to an interior specifically intended for those who have the economic resources to occupy it.

In this way, the Casino is complemented by the Hôtel de Paris, as the former represents ostentation and the latter legitimizes it through history, rituals, privacy, and monumentality.

4. THE CARRÉ D'OR: THE TOTAL AESTHETICS OF LUXURY

The Carré d'Or, home to high-end boutiques, is organized around monumental facades, geometric order, and integrated surveillance systems. This space represents the total aesthetics of luxury, in which brands such as Prada and Hermès adopt recognizable and desirable visual references to aristocratic power as the “modern mythology” described by Barthes (1957).

Commerce and architecture converge in a space where luxury becomes visually accessible to the conventional tourist, although inaccessible on an experiential level. Once again, this observation, prompted by curated shop windows accompanied by material and chromatic elements—marble and gold—reaffirms a system where one can contemplate, but access to these boutiques is restricted to a privileged minority. Social exclusion is naturalized as aesthetics.

5. THE SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION OF THE CASINO DISTRICT AS A SYSTEM OF POWER

The Casino operates as a symbolic center; the Hôtel de Paris as an institutional legitimizer; the Carré d'Or as the everyday setting for elitist consumption. Together they form an area where:

- monumentality directs circulation,
- surveillance ensures segmentation,
- aesthetics legitimize exclusion,
- and visibility produces distinction.

Monte Carlo turns its urban center into a strategic landscape designed to represent social differences, in which the city becomes a ritual space where power is performed.

6. CONCLUSION: THE CASINO AS THE HEART OF THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

The Monte Carlo Casino is much more than a building; it is the nucleus from which the architecture of power in the Principality is designed. This is due to its monumentality, rituals of access, aesthetic appeal, and strategic location, with the Hôtel de Paris and the Carré d'Or being perfect complements to an ecosystem of power, social and aesthetic distinction, and soft exclusion. Together, these spaces form a coherent system where luxury becomes spatial order.

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