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THE IMAGINED CITY: ATLANTIC CITY IN HISTORY AND MEDIA

Sheyla Moroni[1]

[1]*Assistant Professor, Department of Social and Political Science, University of Florence*

Abstract

Atlantic City represents a paradigmatic case of urban identity shaped through the continuous interaction between material transformations and cultural imaginaries. Founded in the mid-nineteenth century as a seaside resort, the city has repeatedly reinvented itself through tourism, Prohibition-era mythology, and the later casino-based economy. This article approaches Atlantic City as a space that exists simultaneously as an urban reality and symbolic construct, actively produced through media, popular culture, and narrative representations. Drawing on urban studies and cultural theory, the analysis explores how songs, films, television series, and other media have not merely reflected social change but have contributed to shaping public perceptions, collective memory, and policy expectations. Particular attention is paid to the circular relationship between imagination and material reality, highlighting how narratives of promise, decline, and regeneration have structured Atlantic City's historical trajectory. By situating the city within broader debates on urban imaginaries, the article argues that Atlantic City functions as an archetype of American urban modernity, where symbolic mediation plays a central role in negotiating identity, memory, and future-oriented visions.

Keywords

Urban Imaginaries; Atlantic City; Cultural Representation; Urban History; Media Narratives

Introduction

Atlantic City can be understood not merely as a bounded urban settlement, but as a historically produced *cultural dispositif* in which built form, political economy, and mediated representation are mutually constitutive. Urban scholarship has long shown that cities are not only lived in space but also apprehended through images, narratives, and memory structures that organize perception and guide action (Lynch, 1960; Boyer, 1994; Huyssen, 2003). In this perspective, the *urban imaginary* is not an ornamental layer appended to material reality; it operates as an infrastructure of meaning that shapes redevelopment agendas, legitimizes selective versions of the past, and stabilizes expectations about the future.

From its mid-nineteenth-century origins as a purpose-built seaside resort, Atlantic City was marketed as an exceptional space where leisure, health, and modernity could be consumed as experience. Such a founding condition matters analytically: it implies that the city's economic viability was intertwined, from the outset, with representational regimes—promotional slogans, spectacular architectures, and repeatable rituals of tourism—rather than with incremental residential continuity. This aligns with Castoriadis's argument that institutions endure through shared symbolic constructions as much as through material arrangements (Castoriadis, 1987). Atlantic City's "successive cities" (resort town, Prohibition-era vice hub, casino city) therefore function less as linear stages than as overlapping narrative strata that continue to reactivate one another in public discourse and planning imaginaries (Rossi, 1982; Simon, 2004).

A central claim of this article is that Atlantic City is best interpreted through a *reality–imagination loop*: a feedback mechanism in which cultural narratives shape urban interventions, and those interventions—whether successful or failed—are reabsorbed into the city's mythology, reinforcing familiar scripts of promise, spectacle, collapse, and rebirth. Following de Certeau (1984), these scripts are not confined to official planning; they circulate through everyday practices, media forms, and popular artifacts that "write" the city in advance of lived experience. Here, Atlantic City offers an unusually legible case: film and television repeatedly recode the city as a moral landscape of risk and reinvention (Malle, 1980; *Boardwalk Empire*, 2010–2014), music condenses it into a

metaphor of precarious hope (Springsteen, 1982), and even game culture abstracts its streets into a universal grammar of speculation (*Monopoly*).

Building on this framework, the study connects Atlantic City's architectural and economic transformations—particularly the Boardwalk's symbolic centrality, the enclave logic of casino urbanism, and the branding-intensive phase exemplified by Trump-era developments—to the mediatic circuits that amplify them. The final sections extend the argument to post-2014 conditions and to digital/immersive mediation, where curated reconstructions and "experiential" heritage intensify long-standing processes of selective memory and hyperreal urban consumption (Baudrillard, 1994; Martina et al., 2013). In doing so, the article treats Atlantic City as an urban palimpsest in which material traces and symbolic expectations coexist, collide, and recursively produce the city's identity.

Historical Framework: Atlantic City as a Layered Urban Narrative

Atlantic City's development was purpose-built from the start. In the mid-19th century, Philadelphia investors literally put it on the map as a seaside resort by drawing a straight rail line to an empty spot on Absecon Island (philadelphiaencyclopedia.org). The young city was marketed as an exceptional retreat – famously nicknamed the *"World's Playground"* by the early 1900 (sislandpress.org) – promising healthful sea air and curated leisure far from industrial grime. Its defining feature became the Boardwalk, first built in 1870, which quickly evolved into more than a simple seaside promenade. The Boardwalk emerged as the city's *"signature attraction,"* even touted by boosters as the "eighth wonder of the world" (philadelphiaencyclopedia.org). This elevated wooden avenue acted as a symbolic spine, organizing Atlantic City's space and social life, effectively translating the promise of controlled pleasure into urban form. By the early 20th century, the Boardwalk had transformed the town from a genteel health resort into a *"dense and vertical fantasyland of affordable luxury and leisure,"* jammed with theaters, amusement piers, lavish hotels, and throngs of visitors (philadelphiaencyclopedia.org). In this formative period, Atlantic City was conceived "less as an organic settlement than as a purpose-built environment" devoted to spectacle and escape – *"a resort... [with] no reason to exist other than to be a resort,"* as one observer later remarked (theguardian.com).

Throughout the 20th century, Atlantic City's urban planning privileged spectacle and accessibility for tourists over the needs of permanent residents. Entertainment zones flourished as semi-autonomous islands insulated from the everyday city. This dynamic intensified dramatically after New Jersey legalized casino gambling in 1976, positioning Atlantic City as the East Coast's exclusive casino enclave. The first casino opened in 1978 amid promises that gambling would rejuvenate the city's economy and urban fabric. In practice, however, the late-1970s and 1980s casino boom reinforced a fragmented urban structure. Enormous casino-hotels rose along the Boardwalk (and later the marina), turning inward with self-contained attractions and walled-off designs that discouraged any engagement with surrounding neighborhoods. Developers replaced the old ornate resort architecture with "slender, non-distinct boxes" ringed by neon and parking garages, explicitly designed to capture visitors' attention (and dollars) and not let them go *"until they had no money left,"* as one history describes (philadelphiaencyclopedia.org). The spatial result was a city within a city: glitzy casino complexes and their immediate surroundings thrived, while adjacent residential areas were bypassed and left in decline. By the late 1980s – a decade into the casino era – Atlantic City had lost 20% of its population, and basic amenities for locals had withered (the city famously had no supermarkets or movie theaters by 1988). Hundreds of independent businesses shut their doors even as the casinos.

In short, the urban core became a patchwork of high-intensity tourist enclaves isolated from a struggling local landscape. Urban design itself functioned as a narrative device during this era, deliberately staging Atlantic City as an *"environment of exception"* – a carnival of risk and reward set apart from ordinary life and community continuity.

> *The Atlantic City Boardwalk at night, dominated by neon-lit casinos like the Trump Taj Mahal and Showboat. The late 20th-century casino boom reshaped the city's skyline and streetscape to prioritize spectacle and gambling, often at the expense of the surrounding urban fabric (*.philadelphiaencyclopedia.org)

Within this broader framework, the rise and fall of Donald Trump's Atlantic City casinos in the 1980s–90s was less an aberration than a flamboyant amplification of the city's existing narrative. Trump entered Atlantic City at the height of the casino boom and eventually operated three major properties (Trump Plaza, Trump Castle, and Trump Taj Mahal) – each emblazoned with his name in towering neon, exemplifying a development approach driven by branding and monumentality. From the outset, Trump leaned heavily into spectacle: the Taj Mahal, opened in 1990 as his flagship, was billed as *"the 8th wonder of the world"* (abcnews.go.com) and marketed as the largest, most opulent casino on earth. *"The scale…the opulence, the size, the everything is really what's going to make the Taj Mahal the most successful hotel anywhere in the world,"* Trump boasted at its grand (openingabcnews.go.com). The launch party featured celebrity guests (Michael Jackson cut the ribbon) and wall-to-wall media coverage, underlining how media visibility was integral to Trump's strategy (abcnews.go.com). In effect, Trump did not

introduce a new vision for Atlantic City so much as he supercharged the existing imaginary of the town as a site of excess, risk, and ostentatious display. His casinos were designed as self-contained fantasy environments (complete with gilt and grandeur) that reinforced the city's identity as a place where bigger and bolder is better.

However, these triumphalist ventures were also built on shaky foundations. Trump's projects prioritized symbolic dominance over economic sustainability, accruing heavy debt and neglecting the deeper social integration of the city. The result was a cycle of high-profile boom and bust. The Trump Taj Mahal, for example, went bankrupt in 1991 – just one year after opening – under the weight of unsustainable financing, presaging a series of Trump casino bankruptcies in the 1990s (jacobin.com). By the mid-2010s, all three Trump casinos had closed their doors, culminating in the dramatic implosion of the Trump Plaza in 2014. Yet the impact of these failures was largely narrative. Media coverage in 2014 chronicled *"four Atlantic City casinos"* shuttering in one year (including two of Trump's), with over 10,000 jobs lost, feeding into a storyline of the city's spectacular collapse. Trump's own roller-coaster tenure in Atlantic City became part of local lore – a cautionary tale of grandiose ambition and hubris. In many ways, these implosions only reinforced Atlantic City's mythology as a place where fortunes are made and lost in equal measure. The image of the city as a realm of bet-it-all glamour and inevitable bust was further cemented in the public imagination. Trump's highly publicized rise and retreat thus did not erase the Atlantic City dreamscape – instead, it added another layer to it, proving that even in failure the spectacle continues to dominate the narrative.

Crucially, each phase of Atlantic City's history has not replaced the previous one but accumulated atop it, creating a richly layered urban narrative. The genteel Victorian resort, the raucous Prohibition-era vice haven, and the neon casino city of late capitalism all coexist in Atlantic City's collective identity. These successive eras survive as overlapping story layers: for example, the 1920s gangster mystique (popularized by HBO's Boardwalk Empire series) still colors the city's persona even in the casino age, and the casino boom's ethos of spectacle continues to shape redevelopment narratives today. Such layering recalls architect Aldo Rossi's conception of the city as a repository of collective memory: "One can say that the city itself is the collective memory of its people…

"The other 'side' of Atlantic City must not be underestimated: already in the 1920s, a process of integration involving minority groups—who, in certain instances, resorted to forms of 'illegal' coercion in order to secure access to the city's informal economy and political arena—was taking place. In the decades that followed, additional and not always transparent forms of 'investment' would increasingly bind the city to organized political coalitions."

The city is the locus of the collective memory" (nulluslocussinegenio.com). Atlantic City exemplifies this idea. Its physical landscape and cultural representations form an urban palimpsest – a text of built forms and myths that is continually rewritten. The city's material transformations (new hotels, demolished casinos, rebuilt piers) are always intertwined with symbolic projections (booster slogans, songs, TV portrayals, news headlines), each era leaving traces that shape how the next is imagined and experienced. Urban form, economic strategy, and cultural narrative converge here to produce a city that is perpetually negotiating its identity through memory and myth. In Atlantic City, the past is never truly past: the "resort paradise," the "Boardwalk Empire," and the "casino capital" all remain present in the city's story, guiding both how it is planned and how it is perceived. This layered collective memory is what makes Atlantic City's urban narrative so singularly American – a place where hope and hype, ambition and collapse, continually write new chapters without erasing the old. The result is a city that exists as much in imagination as in reality, forever oscillating between ruin and revival in the public mind, yet enduring as a compelling locus of urban memory and reinvention.

The Reality–Imagination Loop: Urban Space, Narrative, and Symbolic Feedback

Atlantic City's history reveals a continuous feedback loop between imagination and reality – a cycle where symbolic narratives about the city shape real development decisions, and those material changes in turn feed back into the city's mythos. Urban theorist Michel de Certeau reminds us that cities are produced not only by planners but also by the everyday stories and rituals of their inhabitants (discovernjhistory.org). In Atlantic City, this means the "conceived" city – the one promoted as a glamorous resort of endless opportunity – has often diverged sharply from the lived cityexperienced by residents in day-to-day life. Rather than correcting these mismatches, Atlantic City has repeatedly doubled down on narrative expectations over structural realities, pursuing grand redevelopment schemes inspired by storylinemore than by sustainable urban strategy. The result is a *reality–imagination loop* in which bold visions drive development booms, busts are reinterpreted as part of the city's legend, and the cycle begins anew.

This loop offers a key to understanding why Atlantic City so often opts for spectacle over substance in its redevelopment. Symbolic narratives and urban practice are not separate domains here, but intertwined in a circular process shaping both perception and intervention. The city's identity is continually remade in imagination even as its physical and economic foundations remain precarious. Understanding this dynamic is crucial to explaining Atlantic City's pattern of dramatic booms and busts across decades.

Founded in 1854 as a seaside health resort, Atlantic City quickly learned to market a dream. Early on it was nicknamed the *"Queen of Resorts,"* and by the early 20th century it proudly called itself *"America's Favorite Playground,"* signaling its role as a nationwide escape for pleasure-seekers (atlanticcityexperience.org). The city

specialized in selling fantasy and leisure to outsiders. For example, local businessmen launched the Miss America pageant in 1921 specifically to extend the summer tourist season beyond Labor Day (atlanticcityexperience.org). Beauty queens parading on the Boardwalk each September projected an image of glamour and success, even as this annual ritual primarily served to boost hotel occupancy and business in what would otherwise be an off-season lull.

Atlantic City's first golden era coincided with Prohibition (1920–1933), when lax enforcement turned the town into a notorious haven for illicit drinking, gambling, and entertainments. As chronicled by historian Nelson Johnson, the city "grew into a national resort by promoting vice as a major part of the local tourist trade". In those "Boardwalk Empire" days (memorialized in the HBO series of the same name), political boss Enoch "Nucky" Johnson ensured the resort delivered whatever pleasures visitors desired. This strategy paid off: by the 1930s, Atlantic City attracted throngs of vacationers ranging from working-class day-trippers to wealthy elites, all drawn by the promise of indulgence (atlasobscura.com). *Atlantic City was, in effect, a stage set for America's fantasies* – from the genteel world of saltwater taffy and rolling chairs to the illicit thrills of speakeasies and casino-like betting parlors. The city's famous Boardwalk, lined with grand hotels, theaters, amusements and piers, was the emblem of this imagined paradise by the sea.

Yet, even at its height, the shiny imagery masked underlying fragility. Atlantic City's economy "was totally dependent on money spent by out-of-towners" who had to leave happy for the city to thrive. There was scant diversification. When Prohibition ended and the Great Depression hit, Atlantic City's luck wavered. Post-World War II, the resort fell into steep decline as Americans found new destinations and travel modes. By the 1960s and 70s, the once-grand hotels were aging or abandoned, and the city's population and tax base shrank. (Indeed, between 1930 and 2014 Atlantic City lost about 40% of its residents, leaving thousands of empty housing units as grim reminders of its contraction.) A series of failed urban renewal projects in the 1950s–60s only added to the blight. It was during this nadir that a new narrative emerged to save the city: *legalized casino gambling*. In 1976 New Jersey voters approved casinos for Atlantic City – billed as an economic rescue akin to "Las Vegas East." When Resorts International opened in 1978 as the first legal casino outside Nevada, it seemed to kick off a second golden era. Once again, narrative led the way: the city was reimagined as a glittering gambling mecca that would regenerate jobs, tax revenue, and prestige.

For a time, the casino boom did revitalize Atlantic City's fortunes. Throughout the 1980s and into the early 2000s, flashy casinos rose along the Boardwalk and marina, and tourism surged. At its peak in 2006, Atlantic City's casino industry pulled in over $5 billion in annual revenue (theguardian.com). However, this success contained the seed of a familiar problem: an *overreliance on a single narrative and industry*. The city "put all the eggs in one basket," as Mayor Guardian (the last Republican mayor in the last fifty years) later observed, becoming essentially a one-company town for gaming. Little effort was made to diversify the economy or connect the casino enclave to the broader community. As regional competition grew (new casinos opened in neighboring Pennsylvania, New York, etc.), Atlantic City's exclusive grip on East Coast gambling slipped. The Great Recession of 2008 further depressed revenues. The result was a dramatic bust: between 2006 and 2015, Atlantic City's casino revenues plummeted by more than 50%. From 2014 to 2016, five of the city's twelve casinos shut down, throwing thousands out of work and leaving gaping voids on the Boardwalk (theguardian.com).

Once again, the material foundations of Atlantic City's prosperity had crumbled – and once again, locals and observers began invoking the city's death. A grim old joke resurfaced that "the last person out of town should turn off the lights". Yet notably, even this narrative of collapse was not new for Atlantic City; it had "died" before, in the 1940s, in the 1970s, and each time somehow clawed back. The very mythology of Atlantic City includes the idea of endless cycles of boom, bust, and rebirth. This persistent imaginary of potential renewal would soon assert itself to fill the void left by the latest collapse.

Imagined City vs. Lived City: Gaps and Compensation

A core feature of Atlantic City's reality–imagination loop is the pronounced gap between the imagined city and the lived city. City officials, boosters, and outside investors have continually *conceived* Atlantic City as a place of spectacle, luxury, and exception – an island of dreams removed from ordinary rules. Meanwhile, year-round residents experience a very different reality on the ground: economic instability, social fragmentation, and underinvestment in basic services. This disjunction has been "particularly pronounced" in Atlantic City's case, creating fertile ground for symbolic narratives to function as compensatory frameworks (offering a sense of meaning and direction where the day-to-day conditions feel precarious).

For example, during the 30-year casino era, officials touted Atlantic City as a *world-class destination* of high rollers and nonstop entertainment. Glitzy advertising campaigns in the 2000s declared the city "Always Turned On" and urged tourists to "Do AC" – suggesting a permanently vibrant playground of fun (atlanticcityexperience.org). Yet outside the neon-lit casino strip, residents were facing mounting hardships: unemployment and poverty rates well above state averages, public schools and infrastructure in decline, and entire neighborhoods of the city's inland

sections falling into neglect. The imagined city was one of *glamour*, while the lived city coped with *grit*. Local academics noted the stark reality that Atlantic City "has no reason to exist other than to be a resort" – a service enclave for outsiders – and that despite dreams of broader revival, a diversified economy "is probably not going to happen" (theguardian.com). In other words, the narrative of the city as an *exceptional fantasy island* largely precluded investment in making it a normal, livable city for its 40,000 residents.

Atlantic City's ethnic groups are not rigidly segregated, but certain residential patterns can be identified across the city. African American residents tend to be more concentrated in inland neighborhoods such as Westside and Chelsea Heights, areas that have historically served as working- and middle-class residential districts. Hispanic and Latino populations are more prevalent in central and southern parts of the city, including Chelsea and Lower Chelsea, where housing availability and proximity to transportation links have influenced settlement patterns. Asian residents are notably present in Midtown and parts of the Marina District, while non-Hispanic White residents are more commonly found in Chelsea Heights, Lower Chelsea, and areas closer to the beachfront, although these neighborhoods remain ethnically mixed overall.

Atlantic City's ethnic composition evolved markedly between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, closely mirroring broader patterns of migration, tourism, and urban change in the United States.

In the nineteenth century, following the city's founding in 1854 as a seaside resort, the population was predominantly white and Anglo-Saxon (WASP), made up largely of people of English and Dutch descent from rural New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Irish immigrants formed a significant minority, especially among railroad workers, builders, and seasonal laborers, many arriving in the aftermath of the Great Famine. Smaller numbers of Germans worked as artisans and shopkeepers, while a small but established African American community was already present, employed mainly in domestic service and hotel work. Overall, Atlantic City at this stage was largely white and Protestant, with clear social hierarchies.

In the early twentieth century, particularly between 1900 and 1930, rapid growth fueled by mass tourism dramatically diversified the city's population. Immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe arrived in large numbers. Italians, many from southern regions of Italy, worked in construction, food services, and small businesses, while Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe became especially prominent as merchants, hotel owners, and entrepreneurs, playing a key role in the city's economic life. At the same time, the African American population expanded significantly during the Great Migration, as Black Americans moved north in search of jobs and greater freedom. Atlantic City became an important destination, with vibrant Black neighborhoods such as the Northside and a flourishing cultural scene centered on jazz and nightlife. Despite this diversity, the city remained highly segregated, socially and spatially.

In the mid to late twentieth century, demographic shifts continued. African Americans became an increasingly central part of the city's population, while many Jewish and white residents moved to suburban areas after World War II. From the 1960s onward, Puerto Rican and other Latino communities grew, followed later by immigrants from the Caribbean and Asia. At the same time, Atlantic City experienced population decline and economic hardship, leading to a marked reduction in its white population.

Taken together, Atlantic City's history reveals a progression from a largely Anglo-American resort town in the nineteenth century, to a multiethnic but segregated urban center in the early twentieth century, and finally to a city shaped primarily by African American and Latino communities in the later twentieth century—a social transformation that underpins the city's enduring reputation as a place of glamour, risk, and cultural complexity.

It is important to note that the spatial distribution of residents differs significantly from the profile of casino patrons. The majority of casino visitors are not local residents but tourists and day-trippers, primarily from other parts of New Jersey, neighboring states, and major metropolitan areas such as New York City and Philadelphia. As a result, the demographic composition of casino clientele does not directly reflect the ethnic makeup of the city's permanent population, highlighting the contrast between Atlantic City as a residential space and as a tourist-oriented entertainment destination.

Crucially, these narratives not only misrepresent reality, they actively shape it. Believing Atlantic City's destiny was to be a "site of spectacle and opportunity," decision-makers often neglected structural issues in favor of pursuing the next big promise. When those promises faltered (as with the recent casino closures), the response was not to fundamentally rethink the model, but to re-narrate the situation as *"temporary setback on the way to the next boom."* Sociologist Andreas Huyssen observed that urban memory is highly selective – cities tend to remember the grand dreams and conveniently forget the recurring failures. In Atlantic City, time and again, cycles of investment and decline have been narratively reframed as moments of potential rebirth, allowing the city's imagined future to remain perpetually open despite repeated material setbacks. This resilience of the urban imaginary – its capacity to absorb contradictions – is what keeps Atlantic City "trapped within its own imaginaries" even as real conditions call for change.

The outcome is that symbolic coherence is often privileged over social reality. As long as the story sounds good (a new casino project, a new entertainment complex, a new slogan), it becomes easy to ignore whether it truly addresses the city's deeper needs. Atlantic City's residents, many of whom struggle outside the glowing tourist district, live in the shadow of an image that isn't built for them. The narrative provides hope and purpose on one

level, but it can also reinforce a status quo where *appearance matters more than substance*. This dynamic – a city performing an identity that diverges from its lived experience – is a hallmark of the reality–imagination loop in action.

Architecture of Spectacle: Casinos as Spatial Narratives

Urban form itself has played an active role in sustaining Atlantic City's imagination–reality loop. Nowhere is this clearer than in the architecture of its casinos. These complexes were deliberately designed as self-contained fantasy environments, turning their backs on the surrounding city. The classic casino layout is inward-facing, with labyrinthine gaming floors, windowless interiors, and controlled circulation that keeps visitors *absorbed in the moment*. Time seems suspended (no clocks on the walls, perpetual lighting), and outside reference points are minimized – all to maintain an illusory world of risk, reward, and indulgence. In Atlantic City, many casinos even physically walled themselves off: some were built on piers stretching into the ocean, others ringed by garages and blank walls facing the street. The effect is an urban space that tells a story of escape from reality. As one analysis noted, Atlantic City's built environment "encourages gambling and little else," isolating tourists from the rest of the city – visitors arriving by the expressway encounter the immense facades of casinos and parking structures, but scarcely see the actual town beyond those resorts.

In this sense, architecture functions as a narrative medium in Atlantic City. The sprawling casino-hotels that line the Boardwalk and marina are more than economic venues – they are *stagesets of imagination materialized in concrete and neon*. For example, when the opulent Trump Taj Mahal opened in 1990 with its bulbous domes and minarets, it explicitly evoked a story of exotic grandeur. It wasn't merely a building; it was a statement that Atlantic City could transform itself into a place of "wonders of the world." Similarly, themed casinos like Caesar's (with its Roman columns) or the Wild West Casino use design to transport patrons into a fantasy narrative. By suspending external reality, these spaces reinforce the city's identity as a world apart – a regulated zone of excess where everyday norms (and problems) do not intrude.

Ironically, this architectural strategy further entrenched the divide between the tourist imagination and local reality. The casinos' inward orientation meant that for decades Atlantic City's economic engine was largely disconnected from its urban context. As the Guardian reported, nine casino properties dominated the oceanfront yet were "dislocated from the rest of the city by another block of parking lots, small hotels and vacant land" (theguardian.com). Three additional casinos sat in a marina district completely separated from the traditional street grid. Visitors could drive into a casino garage, spend a weekend on the gaming floors, and leave via the expressway – all without ever engaging with Atlantic City proper. The city's architecture thus literalized the imagination loop: the *conceived space* (glittering casinos) was physically insulated from the *lived space* (struggling neighborhoods a few blocks away). Urban planners often talk about "invisible infrastructures," and in Atlantic City the invisible infrastructure was narrative itself – the city built form to tell a story, and that story in turn dictated the form.

The involvement of Donald Trump in Atlantic City's casino boom provides a vivid illustration of the feedback between narrative ambition and urban reality. In the 1980s and 90s, Trump became the city's most flamboyant casino impresario, eventually owning or lending his name to three of the largest properties Trump's projects did not introduce a new vision for Atlantic City; rather, they *amplified an existing imaginary*– the notion of the city as a grand stage where branding and spectacle could stand in for sound economics. Trump understood that in Atlantic City, *image was king*. He thus pursued monumentality and media buzz at every turn, reinforcing the city's identity as a place where outsized dreams are the norm (and where being "too big to fail" was the implicit mantra – until failure came).

When Trump opened the Taj Mahal in April 1990, he threw a star-studded gala described as "the most expensive party in Atlantic City history," lit by $16 million worth of chandeliers (theguardian.com). He touted the $1.1 billion casino–hotel as *"the eighth wonder of the world,"* boasting it would transform the fortunes of the city (theguardian.com). For a brief period, that bold narrative seemed to hold true – the Taj and Trump's other casinos drew huge crowds, and Trump marketed himself as the savior of Atlantic City. One former cocktail server recalled that in those early days "Trump was like the second coming of Atlantic City… This was going to be the great place to work… we were going to be able to raise our children. It was going to be awesome" (theguardian.com). Such testimonials reveal how deeply the hopeful narrative penetrated: not only investors and officials, but also workers believed in the promise that the city's gamble on glamour would secure everyone's future.

Behind the scenes, however, Trump's ventures were financially shaky and heavily debt-ridden from the start. Over the 1990s and 2000s, his casino company underwent multiple bankruptcies. Trump often managed to extract personal profit– "stripping hundreds of millions of dollars in assets" – while leaving the businesses and the city burdened with the fallout (theguardian.com). By 2009, Trump had largely exited Atlantic City, his name lingering only under licensing deals. Nonetheless, the mythic narrative of Trump in Atlantic City continued to grow: he had been the emblem of outsized ambition, and his rise-and-fall became part of local lore. Even the eventual failures of these ventures did not dismantle the underlying narrative framework of Atlantic City. Instead, they were *absorbed into the city's mythology*, reinforcing an association between ambition, spectacle, and collapse that defines Atlantic

City's symbolic economy. In other words, Trump's spectacular bankruptcy was not seen simply as an isolated business failure, but as almost *fated* – another chapter in the legend of boom and bust on the Boardwalk.

Consider that by the time Trump Plaza (one of his former casinos) finally closed its doors in 2014, it had become the worst-performing casino in town – a "forlorn, empty husk" generating in eight months what a newer casino earned in two weeks (theguardian.com). Yet even as Trump Plaza and others shuttered, the narrative quickly shifted to how those closures symbolized the end of an era, clearing the way for new opportunities. In February 2021, the derelict Trump Plaza tower was dramatically demolished by implosion. Crowds literally paid to watch from cars and cheered as the explosives brought down the structure in 20 seconds. The city's mayor called it *"a historic moment… I got chills"* (theguardian.com). The event had all the hallmarks of a symbolic spectacle: it was marketed as blowing away a bad past and freeing Atlantic City from a lingering "eyesore." But even this destruction fed the imaginary loop – it became part of the grand story (good riddance to the old, hope for the new) rather than a moment of introspection. Tellingly, within months of the implosion, developers and politicians were floating ideas for what big project might rise next on that prime site, again driven by the logic that a bold narrative can jump-start reality.

Trump's tenure in Atlantic City thus exemplifies how *branding triumphs over structural integration*. His name in neon, his gilded edifices, and constant media presence maximized Atlantic City's symbolic visibility, but the local economy remained as fragmented as ever. When the dust settled, Atlantic City was left with empty shells and unpaid bills – yet also with an even stronger cultural script about the city as a place where fortunes are made and lost overnight. In a sense, Trump's legacy in Atlantic City is *a story rather than a structure*: a cautionary tale that nonetheless feeds the legend and attracts the next dreamers.

Media and Myth: Communication of an Urban Imaginary

The public narrative of Atlantic City is perpetuated not only by developers and officials, but by a whole ecosystem of media and cultural representation. Journalistic coverage, for instance, has long oscillated between two tropes: *imminent collapse* and *miraculous revival*. These sensational story frames, repeating over decades, have reinforced the perception of the city as perpetually teetering between failure and reinvention. A striking example is *The Guardian*'s headline in late 2014, during the casino crisis: "End of the Boardwalk empire? The rise and demise of Atlantic City." The article chronicled the closures and job losses, yet also noted a new mayor's optimism and plans for redevelopment. Media reports like this do more than describe events – they *participate in shaping public expectations* and policy discourse. By casting Atlantic City as a "crumbling one-industry town" that might turn itself around with enough will (or a bit of luck such narratives invite readers to see the city through the lens of dramatic storyline rather than mundane reality. Local leaders often play into this: *"Sometimes, you need calamity to get back,"* the last Republican Mayor Don Guardian (2014-2017), told The Guardian in 2014, literally framing disaster as a prelude to renewal.

Beyond news media, popular culture has amplified Atlantic City's mythic dimensions. In the realm of television, HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–2014) reached global audiences with a stylish depiction of Prohibition-era Atlantic City ruled by a cunning boss. The very title *Boardwalk Empire* has entered the lexicon as shorthand for the city's bygone grandeur and corruption. The show was inspired by a local history book, and it vividly brought to life the idea of Atlantic City as a *place where the normal rules never fully applied*. Likewise, the 1980 film *Atlantic City* (starring Burt Lancaster and Susan Sarandon) portrayed the city in transition – a fading resort where old gangsters and young dreamers mingle – ending with a sense that the city's allure and chaos endure cyclically. Even music has played a part: Bruce Springsteen's haunting 1982 song "Atlantic City" famously intoned *"everything dies, baby, that's a fact, but maybe everything that dies someday comes back,"* succinctly capturing the city's perpetual hope amid decline.

It's notable that one of the world's most famous board games, *Monopoly*, is entirely based on Atlantic City's street grid. Generations of children have grown up knowing of "Park Place" and "Boardwalk" as the epitome of prime real estate and high stakes. When *Parker Brothers* published Monopoly in 1935, Atlantic City was still *one of the most luxurious and famous resorts in America* (atlasobscura.com). The game's imagery of buying and selling property, building hotels, and risking it all on a roll of the dice can be seen as a microcosm of Atlantic City's ethos. Today, ironically, many of the real streets from the Monopoly board have seen better days – the once-glamorous hotels have become a "gilded ghost town," as one writer put it (atlasobscura.com). Yet the cultural imprint of those names keeps Atlantic City in the popular imagination as a city of capitalist fantasy.

Atlantic City also continuously rebrands itself through slogans and campaigns, i.e. formal communications that distill its narrative. Over the years the city adopted monikers like *"America's Favorite Playground," "World's Playground,"* and (more recently) *"Always Turned On"* and "Do AC." Each catchphrase sought to signal renewal and excitement, even as the underlying product remained the same. For instance, the "Do AC" campaign launched in 2012 emphasized non-gambling attractions and a hipper image, trying to counteract the narrative of Atlantic City as an old-fashioned gamblers' haven. Such slogans – *"Queen of Resorts," "America's Favorite Playground," "Always Turned On," "Do AC"* – read like a timeline of how Atlantic City has marketed its imagined identity

(atlanticcityexperience.org). They promise visitors that Atlantic City is fun, alive, and open to all, despite recessions or recessions or superstorms. They are, in effect, the city talking to itself as much as to the world, renewing the faith that the next boom is just around the corner.

To summarize the key cultural narratives shaping Atlantic City's image:

- Historic Slogans and Branding: Over the 20th century, Atlantic City embraced titles like *"World's Playground"*and *"America's Favorite Playground,"* projecting an image of a democratic paradise of leisure for all comers (atlanticcityexperience.org). In the 21st century, slogans such as *"Always Turned On"* and *"Do AC"*continued the trend, marketing the city as perpetually vibrant and *"on,"* even during downturns (atlanticcityexperience.org).
- Miss America Pageant: This iconic event, hosted in Atlantic City for nearly a century, was originally conceived purely as a tourist draw in 1921 (to lengthen the summer season) (atlanticcityexperience.org). Yet it grew into a piece of Americana that linked the city's name with glamour, patriotism, and idealized beauty. The pageant's annual Boardwalk parade (complete with the famous "Show Us Your Shoes" tradition) reinforces a narrative of Atlantic City as a place of tradition, spectacle, and aspirational dreams.
- Television and Film: HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* and films like *Atlantic City* (1980) or *Ocean's Eleven* (the 2001 remake briefly features Atlantic City) present the city as a mythic locale of crime, chance, and reinvention. These stories, though set in specific eras, echo contemporary themes – underscoring that Atlantic City's essence lies in larger-than-life characters and second chances.
- Music and Literature: Songs such as "Under the Boardwalk" (1964) and "Atlantic City" (1982) in very different ways cement the city's romantic and tragic aura. Writers from novelists to journalists have repeatedly used Atlantic City as a metaphor for the American urban spectacle – from the corruption-laced prosperity depicted in Nelson Johnson's *Boardwalk Empire* book to the investigative journalism of the 2010s examining the city's financial collapse and attempted rebirth (theguardian.com).
- The Monopoly Board Game: By reproducing Atlantic City's street names on every game board, Monopoly turned the city into a universal symbol of high-risk real estate and get-rich-quick ambition. The fact that Marvin Gardens and Ventnor Avenue are real places often comes as a surprise to players – a reminder that Atlantic City was once *synonymous with opulent properties and wealth*. As one PBS feature noted, *"Atlantic City was once known* as a *"boardwalk empire"* of its own (news5cleveland.compbs.org).
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Through these myriad channels of communication – from news articles to TV shows, from local parades to board games – Atlantic City's identity has been collectively shaped and reinforced far beyond its physical boundaries. The picture that emerges from cultural narratives is not necessarily coherent or accurate, but it is powerful. They tend to simplify the city's complex reality into recognizable patterns: the corrupt boomtown, the underdog comeback story, the faded glory by the sea. These patterns then feed back into how investors, politicians, and the public approach Atlantic City in real life. In essence, the storytelling preconditions the strategy.

Perpetual Reinvention: Post-2014 Crisis and the Loop Endures

The tumultuous events after 2014 provide a final case study of the reality–imagination loop at work. As noted, the year 2014 saw four major casinos close (including the brand-new $2.4 billion Revel, which had opened just two years prior as a beacon of "revitalization". Thousands lost their jobs, Atlantic City's fiscal situation verged on bankruptcy, and the wider world openly questioned if the city's run had finally ended (discovernjhistory.org). State officials stepped in: by 2016, New Jersey formally took over Atlantic City's governance and finances, an extraordinary intervention aimed at staving off a municipal bankruptcy. This state takeover was accompanied by grim facts – casino revenues had halved in a decade, the city's debt was mounting, and even essential assets like the water utility were at risk of privatization to pay bills. In essence, reality had caught up with Atlantic City's decades of imbalance.

Yet the narrative loop *spun these events in a familiar way*. Rather than a straightforward story of decline, the crisis was immediately reframed as an *inflection point brimming with potential*. The local joke about "last one out turn off the lights" was countered by leaders saying *the lights were not going out at all*. New Jersey's then-governor, Chris Christie, portrayed the state takeover as tough love that would *pave the way for Atlantic City's resurgence*. Meanwhile, developers saw opportunity in the ashes: within months of the 2014 closings, plans were floated to reopen or repurpose the shuttered properties. True to form, narrative expectations led the way.

In 2018, two of the closed casinos did indeed roar back to life under new ownership and branding. The former Trump Taj Mahal was reopened as the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino after a $500 million makeover, and the vacant Revel was re-launched as the Ocean Resort Casino. The openings were accompanied by deliberate fanfare: guitar-smashing ceremonies, fireworks, A-list entertainers performing on opening weekend (abcnews.go.com). City

officials proclaimed a *"new era" – "There's a renaissance; there's a synergy in the air,"* said Mayor Frank Gilliam at the time. The summer of 2018 saw Atlantic City's boardwalk packed with its largest crowds in a decade, and headlines declared the city was poised for a comeback (abcnews.go.com). *"Atlantic City is not dead,"*insisted one gaming industry observer, noting the sense of hope as the casinos rebootedabcnews.go.com. Indeed, for that season, the narrative seemed to manifest: tourism ticked up, thousands of jobs returned, and the city welcomed legal sports betting as a new attraction (betting parlors opened in 2018, adding to the buzz).

However, as always, the real test would come after the initial hype. By late 2019 and into 2020, it was clear that Atlantic City still faced structural challenges – market saturation of casinos, competition, and the same old social issues. The COVID-19 pandemic then dealt an unforeseen blow, closing casinos for months in 2020 and undercutting some of the gains. Yet even that crisis was swiftly enveloped by narrative: casinos touted their grand reopenings with new safety protocols in 2020, and policymakers talked up infrastructure grants and new non-casino developments (like a proposed water park and esports arena) as signs that Atlantic City would adapt once again. The cycle of "down, but not out" continued.

Atlantic City's ability to constantly *reenvision its future* – however disconnected from past experience – is in many ways a testament to the strength of urban imagination. It has what one scholar called "endless cycles of creative destruction," where each wave of demolition and construction is guided by the "dreams and fantasies of the people who walk along the Boardwalk". When those dreams change, the city changes with them, often razing the old to make way for the new in a literal enactment of the narrative cycle. The danger, of course, is that without learning from the past, each iteration may repeat the same mistakes. Atlantic City's invisible infrastructure of narrative can be double-edged: it provides a framework of meaning and ambition that keeps the city moving forward, but it also can blind stakeholders to practical limitations and social needs, since *misalignments between the story and reality are glossed over rather than confronted*.

Atlantic City exemplifies how a city can become trapped in its own imaginary, continuously retelling familiar stories of promise and failure that guide both its cultural representation and its on-the-ground interventions. This reality–imagination loop operates like a circle: bold narratives inspire tangible urban projects, those projects often falter against economic and social realities, and then the outcomes (even the failures) get woven back into the grand narrative as lessons or lore, setting the stage for the next cycle. Rather than breaking free of its boom-bust pattern, Atlantic City's political and business leaders, along with the media and public, have often chosen to reinforce the comforting myth that one big development or one more makeover will finally align the city with its dreams.

The case of Atlantic City serves as both warning and wonder. On one hand, it highlights the pitfalls of privileging *symbolic coherence over social sustainability*. A city cannot thrive on image alone; eventually, reality bites. Neglecting the lived city – its residents, its diversity of economy, its infrastructure – in favor of an over-engineered fantasy leads to fragility. Atlantic City's recurring crises underscore that gap. On the other hand, the city's enduring capacity to imagine and reimagine itself speaks to a human tendency to seek meaning and hope through narrative. Atlantic City's urban memory, selective though it may be, continually reactivates tales of potential rebirth while marginalizing memories of past disappointments. This performative memory can rally energy and investment when most needed (as seen every time new investors take a chance on the Boardwalk).

In the end, Atlantic City shows that urban space and narrative are inseparable – each shaping the other in a feedback loop. The Boardwalk, the casinos, the imploding towers, the parades of beauty queens and costumed tourists: all are stage props and actors in a long-running story. As long as people "want to be here" and believe in the story – as a former mayor urged, *"like it's sunny and beautiful and you want to be here"*– the narrative will persist. Whether Atlantic City can one day redirect that narrative toward a more inclusive and stable reality remains an open question. For now, the city remains a fascinating study of imagination's infrastructure: a place where the line between the real city and the *story* of the city has all but vanished, each continuously calling the other into being.

Digital and immersive technologies are not a rupture from earlier forms of representing cities, but rather an intensification of long-standing storytelling processes. Cities like Atlantic City have always existed as much in the imagination as in reality, continually shaped by narratives, media, and collective memory. In Atlantic City's case, a "reality–imagination loop" has historically guided its development, where symbolic images and stories feed into material changes, and vice versa. Within this symbolic economy, digital mediation emerges as a contemporary extension of that loop – offering new interactive modes of engagement while reproducing familiar narrative structures. In other words, virtual and augmented experiences continue the city's tradition of being imagined, narrated, and remembered through evolving media forms.

Atlantic City's Symbolic Economy: History and Media Narratives

From its inception as a 19th-century seaside resort, Atlantic City was conceived and sold as an experiential fantasy. By the 1920s, capitalizing on an atmosphere of carefree indulgence during Prohibition. Under political boss Enoch "Nucky" Johnson, the city openly flouted federal law by allowing illegal drinking and gambling, turning defiance itself into a tourist draw (Wonderfulmuseums.com). This audacious era, later immortalized in HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*, shows how Atlantic City functioned as a stage for narratives of glamour and risk even in its early history.

Contemporary reflections note that the city "literally thumbed its nose at federal law, transforming its defiance into a unique selling point" – truly a *Boardwalk Empire* in every sense (wonderfulmuseums.com).

Equally telling is how Atlantic City leveraged media and popular culture to sustain its allure. In 1921, local leaders launched the Miss America Pageant as a publicity stunt to extend the summer tourist season. This event quickly grew into a national spectacle, one that the city shrewdly promoted through nascent mass media. As one museum commentator observes, Atlantic City's pageant was never just about beauty queens – it was about "how a city leveraged a nascent media phenomenon to create a national event, ensuring its continued relevance on the American stage" (wonderfulmuseums.com). By broadcasting images of glamour (first through newsreels and newspapers, later via radio and television), Atlantic City cemented itself in the national imagination as a place of youth, beauty, and celebration. These early 20th-century media narratives became part of the city's identity, demonstrating the power of mediated representation in shaping urban mythos.

The city's trajectory also shows the flip side of media representation. As Atlantic City declined by the mid-20th century, the narrative of glamour gave way to one of decay. Notably, media coverage of the 1964 Democratic National Convention – hosted in a visibly downtrodden Atlantic City – highlighted urban blight (dilapidated hotels, poverty, crime) and effectively branded the city a "failed resort" in the public eye. In this way, newspapers and television in the 1960s reinforced a new storyline of Atlantic City as a symbol of urban decline. Such examples underscore that Atlantic City's fate has long been entwined with media narratives: whether it's the *Roaring Twenties* indulgence, the pageant's wholesome glamour, or the later images of destitution, the city has been continuously constructed and reconstructed in the popular imagination through media storytelling.

Crucially, Atlantic City's symbolic economy – the value it derives from image and narrative – has persisted across eras. In short, Atlantic City's identity has always been negotiated through a blend of reality and representation, with historical events and media products (songs, films, TV series, even a famous board game) continually refreshing the city's mythos.

The rise of immersive digital environments – especially virtual reality (VR) reconstructions of urban spaces – follows this legacy of selective storytelling. Such environments do not attempt a neutral, exhaustive reproduction of the city's past. Rather, they create curated, affective interpretations that privilege atmosphere, mood, and experiential continuity over factual completeness. As scholars of urban memory note, any form of mediation involves acts of selection that determine what elements of the past become visible, memorable, and emotionally resonant. VR reconstructions, like earlier photographs or films, inevitably highlight certain details while omitting others, guided by the narrative or feeling they seek to convey. In this sense, digital reconstructions should be seen as interpretative devices, not instruments of literal restitution. They add another layer to the city's collective memory, often reinforcing the themes that already dominate the city's legend.

A telling example is the project *One Day at the Sands*, a VR application that virtually recreates the famous Sands Hotel and Casino as it stood in 1950s Las Vegas. This immersive project explicitly focuses on capturing the *intangible heritage*of the casino – the look, sound, and feel of the space – rather than presenting a detailed historical documentary. As described by its creators, *One Day at the Sands* was designed to "convey the atmosphere" of a mid-century casino, allowing users to navigate a virtual Sands and even access archival materials at their own pace (scispace.com). The emphasis is on sensory immersion: the glow of neon lights, the buzz of slot machines and big band music, the spatial rhythms of lounges and gaming tables. The goal is to evoke *a specific experiential dimension* of that era, so that memory is "activated through affective engagement rather than through factual accumulation". In practical terms, a user donning a VR headset can *walk* through the Sands Casino's virtual corridors and feel the ambiance of 1950s Vegas nightlife – an experience that triggers nostalgia or historical imagination in a visceral way, even if it doesn't relay every factual detail about the period. Such projects illustrate how digital media can intensify storytelling: they invite people to inhabit a narrative (in this case, the Rat Pack-era glamour of Las Vegas) through immersive simulation.

Importantly, these VR narratives mirror the selective memory processes long present in Atlantic City's own storytelling. Just as a heritage museum or a film might choose certain highlights (a beauty pageant, a famous nightclub, a boxing match on the Boardwalk) to represent the city's past, a VR environment also curates which moments and sensations of history to emphasize. What becomes digitally "real" is what is deemed emotionally and culturally significant. This selectivity raises critical questions: *Which past is being preserved, and whose memories are being foregrounded?* Urban historians like M. Christine Boyer and Andreas Huyssen remind us that what we remember of a city is always filtered – shaped by present needs and dominant narratives. A digital project might recreate the glamorous casino floors of 1950s Atlantic City or Las Vegas, but not the back alleys of poverty or the social injustices of that same era. Thus, while immersive narratives greatly enhance engagement, they also continue the tradition of strategic remembering and forgetting in urban storytelling.

When placed in the context of Atlantic City's history, today's immersive practices reveal a striking continuity between past and present forms of urban narrative. Whether encountered physically or digitally, the casino functions as a stageupon which tales of glamour, risk, and exceptionality are performed. In Atlantic City's heyday, its ornate hotels, bustling Boardwalk, and neon-lit casinos set a scene that invited visitors to suspend everyday reality and partake in a kind of theater of indulgence. Similarly, a virtual reconstruction of a casino invites users to step into

a *storyworld* where the normal rules are on hold – a space of endless night, jingling coins, and the hope of a jackpot, with no hint of the world outside. The *experience* is the story. VR thus replicates and amplifies the symbolic logic already embedded in Atlantic City's built environment and cultural memory. The same narratives of risk and reward that lured gamblers to the Boardwalk are now repackaged in digital form to lure users into virtual landscapes of nostalgia.

This convergence strongly resonates with Jean Baudrillard's notion of *hyperreality*. Baudrillard observed that in a media-saturated society, simulations and representations can produce effects that feel as real as – or even more real than – direct experience (publicpressure.io). Atlantic City, often compared to a fantasy playground, has long offered experiences that blur the line between the authentic and the staged (consider the way a casino's interior can make 3 PM feel like midnight, or how a "Miss America" crowning could symbolize national hopes). In the digital age, mediated representations are now creating their own reality effects. A virtual Atlantic City or Las Vegas can be meticulously detailed and emotionally captivating, potentially inducing in users the same exhilaration or nostalgia that the actual places do. The hyperreal danger, as Baudrillard would point out, is that the simulation *perfects* the myth – it presents the city *exactly* as we want to remember or imagine it, without the rough edges of reality. We get the glamour without the grit, the thrill without the risk. In a hyperreal Atlantic City, the legend overtakes the lived reality, and many visitors might even prefer the virtual ideal to the real, imperfect city.

Yet, it's worth noting that Atlantic City was *always* a bit hyperreal. Umberto Eco once described American tourist sites (like Disneyland or Las Vegas) as striving to be "more real than real," a concept that Atlantic City's early attractions also embraced (think of the scale replicas, fantasy architecture, or the performative nature of its Boardwalk entertainments). The digital realm simply carries this tendency forward. By amplifying spectacle and removing limitations, immersive tech can create an Atlantic City experience that feels like a distilled version of its mythos – *Atlantic City on steroids*, so to speak.

Nostalgia and the "Curated Past"

One of the most powerful dynamics that digital mediation reinforces is nostalgia. Atlantic City's cultural economy has long traded on nostalgia for its "better days" – the lingering aura of the 1920s jazz age, the mid-century modern cool, or the glory of the early casino era. Immersive narratives tap directly into this temporal sentiment. By enabling users to inhabit carefully curated versions of the past, they contribute to a form of retrospective imagination that stabilizes certain moments in collective memory while marginalizing others. For instance, a virtual tour might let you wander a perfect reconstruction of 1959 Boardwalk Hall during a pageant, or sit at a blackjack table circa 1975, complete with era-appropriate music and décor. Such experiences *freeze* these chosen moments in an eternal, consumable form – history transformed into a themed environment that you can visit on demand. The temporal loop of nostalgia is thereby tightened: we revisit a past that was itself often consciously styled (the past's own self-image), and in doing so, we potentially neglect the flow of time in between or the evolution of the city beyond those highlights.

In Atlantic City's case, this means the golden eras are continually revived, while periods of decline or social struggle fade further from view. The process does not simply preserve memory; it actively reshapes it. What is remembered and celebrated in digital form tends to align with *contemporary expectations* and desires. A modern audience might yearn for the romance of a Prohibition speakeasy or the cool of a casino lounge – and thus those are the scenarios likely to be built out in VR. This creates a consumable past: history packaged to entertain and reassure, rather than to challenge. As a result, immersive nostalgia can gloss over historical complexities (like segregation on the Boardwalk, or the plight of local residents during casino booms and busts) in favor of a smoother narrative that keeps the fantasy intact. Atlantic City's own marketing has long done the same, trumpeting its past glamour even during downturns. Now, digital platforms continue the trend, letting users literally walk through idealized past worlds. The *danger* is that by basking in curated nostalgia, both city planners and the public may lose sight of pressing present realities – a pattern that Atlantic City has experienced before.

On the other hand, immersive nostalgia also highlights the deep emotional connection people have with Atlantic City's storied past. The very fact that projects are recreating the Diving Horse act from Steel Pier or the grand lobby of the Traymore Hotel indicates a collective longing to hold onto those fragments of memory. In a positive sense, such digital archives of experience ensure that Atlantic City's cultural heritage is not lost to time, but re-presented to new generations in vivid form. The key is to balance this *heritage tourism* aspect with a critical understanding that what we see is a performance of memory, not unmediated history.

Rather than resolving the age-old tension between representation and reality, the advent of digital mediation in Atlantic City makes that tension more explicit than ever. Virtual reconstructions, by their very nature, expose the constructed nature of the experience – reminding users that what they're engaging with is a designed simulation. In doing so, they underscore the *performative dimension* of urban memory. This performativity has always been present (every guided tour, postcard, or film about Atlantic City performs a version of the city), but it becomes especially apparent when you can literally toggle a city's past on and off with a headset. Each immersive narrative is a miniature stage, with code and pixels standing in for buildings and people, and designers (much like authors or playwrights) deciding the script of what is shown or omitted.

Acknowledging this constructedness is healthy: it reminds us that Atlantic City – the idea of it – has been continuously *assembled and reassembled* through narrative, image, and technology. The city's identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing production. In a way, digital mediation holds up a mirror to Atlantic City's entire history of image-making. It invites us to see how layered the reality–imagination loop truly is. For example, a VR experience of a 1920s Atlantic City hotel might prompt users to ask how that era itself was stage-managed by the likes of Nucky Johnson, or how much of what we "know" about that time comes from movies and legend. In this manner, the virtual experience can provoke reflection on *all* the layers of mediation – from the original architectural theatrics of the city, to mid-century postcards and songs, to modern television dramas and, now, digital reconstructions.

In extending Atlantic City's reality–imagination loop into these new experiential domains, digital media do not let the city escape its narratives; instead, they reinforce Atlantic City's status as a paradigmatic city of spectacle and story. The Boardwalk, the casino halls, the souvenir snow globes, the VR headset – each is a medium through which Atlantic City is continually re-authored. The city's identity is negotiated through layers of symbolic representation, and with each layer the line between *reality* and *imagination* blurs a bit more. In 2025 and beyond, one can visit Atlantic City in person or online, and in either case encounter a place heavy with *its own myth*. The challenge and opportunity ahead lie in using these immersive tools to enrich understanding (perhaps integrating more voices and hidden histories into the narrative), rather than simply to mythologize further.

In conclusion, the digital mediation of Atlantic City's past and present demonstrates the enduring power of urban imagination. It confirms that the city, as experienced, has always been a blend of bricks and stories, truth and make-believe. By making the act of mediation itself visible, virtual narratives encourage us to recognize the city as a living construct – a place we continuously make meaningful through our representations. This realization is key to appreciating Atlantic City not just as a seaside town with casinos, but as a cultural artifact: a device through which we can watch the processes of modern urban identity formation at work. Digital or not, Atlantic City's saga reminds us that every city is, in part, a story we tell ourselves – and that with each new medium, we find new ways to tell it.

Conclusion

This article has approached Atlantic City as a layered urban narrative in which material space and cultural representation are inseparable. Rather than reading the city through a linear arc of rise and decline, the analysis has emphasized stratification and recursion: resort imaginaries, Prohibition mythologies, and casino capitalism accumulate as overlapping "story layers" that remain available for reactivation in moments of crisis and redevelopment. In Rossi's terms, cities functions as a locus of collective memory in which urban form persists as a carrier of meanings that exceed any single historical phase (Rossi, 1982). Yet, as Huyssen (2003) cautions, such memory is performative and selective: what is preserved, repeated, and circulated often corresponds to the needs of present-day legitimation rather than to a neutral archival record.

The concept of a reality–imagination loop has been key to explaining why Atlantic City repeatedly turns toward redevelopment strategies grounded in symbolic visibility—branding, spectacle, and narrative coherence—more than in structural integration. Casino architecture and the enclave organization of tourist space materialize this logic by constructing environments that suspend ordinary spatial reference and intensify experiential consumption. Within this symbolic economy, the Trump casino ventures can be read not as a rupture but as an amplification: monumentality, naming practices, and media saturation were deployed as urban techniques intended to substitute visibility for resilience. Importantly, the subsequent failures did not dissolve the narrative; they were absorbed into it, strengthening the city's long-running mythology of ambition and collapse.

Post-2014 events make the mechanism even clearer. The wave of casino closures and the broader fiscal crisis did not simply signal "decline"; they became a narrative hinge mobilized by media framings and political rhetoric oscillating between catastrophe and rebirth. The reopening and rebranding of flagship properties in subsequent years exemplify how urban futures in Atlantic City are repeatedly staged as resets—promissory spectacles that reassert the city's imagined destiny as a site of exception. Such cycles demonstrate that narrative is not an epiphenomenon but an active component of urban governance: it conditions what kinds of projects are thinkable, fundable, and publicly defensible.

Finally, the extension of Atlantic City's symbolic economy into digital and immersive mediation underscores continuity rather than disruption. Virtual reconstructions and experiential heritage projects foreground affect, atmosphere, and curated nostalgia, intensifying longstanding dynamics of selection and omission that structure urban memory (Boyer, 1994; Martina et al., 2013). In Baudrillard's terms, these practices contribute to a hyperreal register in which representations generate reality effects that can rival or supersede direct experience (Baudrillard, 1994). The analytical implication is double-edged: immersive media can broaden access to urban memory, yet it can also consolidate simplified myths if it reproduces only the glamorous layers of the past.

Atlantic City therefore emerges as a paradigmatic case of modern urbanity in which identity is negotiated through the circulation of symbolic narratives that mediate between past, present, and imagined futures. Recognizing this condition matters beyond the local case: it invites a broader reflection on how contemporary cities—especially those

dependent on tourism, entertainment, and branding—risk becoming locked into self-reinforcing imaginaries that privilege spectacle over social sustainability. The challenge, for Atlantic City and for comparable urban contexts, is whether narrative infrastructures can be redirected: from repetition of boom–bust mythologies toward more inclusive representations and materially grounded forms of urban repair.

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