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OPINION

Trump's pitch: His gilded glamour

By VIRGINIA POSTREL

Why would anyone vote for Donald Trump? One popular theory holds that his supporters are bigots angered by America's changing racial mix. Another is that they're sail-of-the-earth working folks left behind by the loss of manufacturing jobs, alienated from the moneyed ruling class, and irritated by the tyranny of political correctness. Or some combination thereof.

These theories, which contain elements of truth, emphasize Trump's dire assessment of present-day America and his followers' discontent. They focus on negative sentiment. But an important part of the story is Trump's positive allure — the way the candidate taps into, and projects, the most fundamental outlines of the American Dream.

Conventional explanations miss the glamour of Trump's message.

The word "glamour" originally meant a literal magic spell that makes people see things differently than they are. Understood correctly, glamour is not a particular style — different styles seem glamorous to different people — but, like humor, a form of communication that creates a specific emotional response. Glamour generates a feeling of projection and longing: "if only... If only I could walk that red carpet, drive that car, wear that dress, belong to that group, have that job, be (or be with) that person ... if only I could have that life.

The feeling is universal, but the manifestation is particular: One person's glamorous vacation may be a busy trip to Paris, while another dreams of the solitude of a mountain cabin. What you find glamorous depends on who you are — and who you yearn to be.

To tastemakers and TED talkers, Trump may seem innocently vulgar, with his braggadocio, teased hair and preference for well-done steaks. But one definition of "vulgar" is "of or relating to the common people," and a lot of folks find Trump their kind of tycoon: a totem of success in whom they can imagine their ideal selves. "Trump is the big time, the bright lights, the fancy everything, and wealth and fame and all things I am not but would like to be," said supporter Michael Stuart Kelly, who runs an internet marketing company. Kelly believes that the candidate appeals to "good, intelligent, productive people who dream big, even when they can't live it." Unlike moguls who inspire resentment, Trump encourages his audience to imagine sharing his success.

Even more than fashion and film, the real estate and travel industries — where Trump has made most of his money — employ glamour as a tool of persuasion and sales. With carefully crafted words and imagery, marketers invite customers to project themselves into a different, better setting and, through it, a different, better life. Stay in a Trump hotel, the corporate website promises, and you won't just get a nice room, you'll be "a star." "You'll enjoy a lifestyle where you can do more, experience more and live life without boundaries, limits or compromise." Glamour is much more than luxury. It promises transformation.

In this way, Trump combines powerful charisma, which draws audiences to enlist in his cause, with the salesmanship of a real estate brochure. At times the appeal is so explicit, it's meta: "We need somebody that can take the brand of the United States and make it great again," he said in announcing his candidacy.

His branding efforts permeate everything he says, with his repetition on the campaign trail of certain words: "win," "respect," "strong," "powerful," "rich,"



GERALD HERBERT/AP

Rosemary Carver, a supporter of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, arrives Tuesday at his primary-election-night event at the Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, Fla.

"leader" and, of course, "build." The right words can cast a spell, even if they don't really make sense. "We are going to do something so good and so fast and so strong, and the world is going to respect us again, believe me," Trump told supporters after his win in New Hampshire, letting them fill in the blanks with their own desires. (It's a trick well-honed during his business career. He once asked a vendor: "What should I call my next project? Celestia? Empireman? Royal Imperial Regal?")

Like all forms of glamour, this salesmanship transmits an artificial sense of grace. It conceals effort, costs, difficulties and flaws: the constant maintenance that keeps the golf course pristine, the wear from real-life traffic on the white rug, the sand in the bathing suit, the jet lag, the family squabbles. Like the performance of a magic trick, glamour relies on the suspension of disbelief.

On the campaign trail, the candidate portrays himself as a maker. "Who can build better than Trump? I build; it's what I do," he said, defending the practicality of his proposed border wall. For his supporters, the attraction is not just the possibility that the wall will be built but the belief that their candidate is a doer, someone whose abilities transcend the quotidian and inadequate skills of the political class currently in power. The builder image carefully omits the fact that these days, Trump doesn't make his money by erecting new high-rises or resorts. Instead, he's turned himself into what branding consultant Robert Passikoff calls "a human brand extraordinaire." He licenses his name to other developers as a lifestyle promise, which turns out to add significant value.

Passikoff's June 2015 Brand Keys Human Brands Survey found, for instance, that adding the Trump name to a golf or country club membership raised its perceived value by 35 percent, while the perceived value of a real estate property went up 28 percent. (The survey is annual, so it remains to be seen how Trump's presidential campaign may have affected his perceived value as a commercial brand.)

"Trump" in other words, doesn't refer just to a literal human being or the campaign promises he's made. It signifies an ideal life. In a commercial context, the name represents aspiration and visible quality. "We have never stayed at a place so luxurious, for common folk like us — we were simply blown away by how beautiful everything was," Debbie K. wrote in a recent TripAdvisor review of the Trump

hotel in Las Vegas. You might sniff at the candidate's over-the-top taste for gilt furniture, but the extravagance is an overt sign of material success — success that Trump the host shares with his guests.

Although Trump's working-class support gets the attention, many enthusiasts are, like Kelly, small-business owners. A Center for Public Integrity analysis of his campaign contributions through January found that, leaving aside retirees, Trump donors most commonly owned or operated businesses. These weren't high-flying, venture-capital-backed growth companies. They were Main Street enterprises, often with a blue-collar feel. "The businesses ranged from heating and air conditioning contracting companies to exterminators to restaurants. There were auto dealerships, real estate offices, retail outlets and small manufacturers," the center's John Dunbar and Cady Zuvich wrote.

Such voters perceive the candidate completely differently than those who find Trump at best erratic and out of his depth, and at worst an intolerant would-be strongman with contempt for Latinos, Muslims and the rule of law. Supporters see instead a competent high achiever who works with all kinds of people to accomplish great things. Trump represents who they'd like to be. "I have a great amount of interest and respect to anyone that can grow a business with that many people — a wild amount of respect," Hugh Joyce, who owns a heating and air-conditioning business, told the center's researchers. Kelly marvels at Trump's "wealth-producing character. How does he do it? That's what people want to know."

In speeches, Trump promises a triumphant, can-do United States that strides the world like a colossus, building grand new public works and bending other nations to its will with audit negotiation — all while lowering taxes. It's his version of 1950s America, without the unfortunate mess of World War II to wipe out the competition. And he makes it all sound so easy, like magic.

"We are going to start winning again. And we're going to win so much, you are going to be so happy. We are going to make America so great again," he promised after New Hampshire. "Maybe greater than ever before."

All you have to do is sign the contract, buy the dream and not think too much about what all that glamour is hiding.

Virginia Postrel, a columnist for Bloomberg View, wrote for The Washington Post.