

LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS: THE FORGOTTEN SYMBOLISM OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM

By Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour
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A Review by Barry Thalden, AIA

This is a fiery book filled with searing insights and revolutionary ideas. It was published 30 years ago, but its message is still relevant today. This watershed book was a direct attack on the foundation of the then-dominant mode of modernism in architecture, a treatise that created great controversy and argument. It was read with outrage by many. It's clear in many ways that it heralded the beginning of the end of the 'International Style' invented by the Bauhaus School. It initiated a great revolution toward architecture preferred by the people versus an esoteric aesthetic which was only understood by an architectural elite. The authors use Las Vegas as the likely prototype of the new commercialism of American cities. It presents a new kind of building reflecting the speed of the highway and the changing lifestyle of the public.

The International Style, which first appeared in the 1940s, had dominated American cities. Leaders of the Bauhaus School had overturned Romantic Architecture of the 18th century in their attempt to turn all buildings into industrialized boxes that looked like steel factories. Mies van der Rohe



On Left & Corner The Las Vegas Strip, present. Below The Las Vegas Strip, ca 1977.



had proclaimed "less is more," and LeCorbusier had suggested tearing down Paris and starting over. The International Style architects had abandoned painting, sculpture, graphics and any other icons of Romantic Architecture. This architecture turned its back on the suburban home and the commercial strip (possibly named after the Las Vegas strip), pretending that these prolific buildings were simply non-architecture. Unfortunately, "this viewpoint throws out the variety with the vulgarity."

Learning from Las Vegas proposed a new architecture. Through observation, the authors distinguish two types of buildings as being valid. First, the building shell is designed to a program, and then ornament is applied.



The authors refer to this as "the decorated shed." Even Mies van der Rohe, while proclaiming that "less is more," often ornamented buildings with steel sections on the outside over the fireproofing to reflect the structure on the inside. The ornament of Las Vegas is less philosophical, but in some ways more honest. It is exactly what it is and pretends to be nothing else.

The second building type is where the "...space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form." This building might become a sculpture, a big sign with a little building, or even a building becoming a sign (i.e. a duck-shaped drive-in restaurant, "the Long Island Duckling"). The book challenges the "too serious" architecture of the day and asks why an exposed steel structure is more pure than a giant hot dog-shaped building for a hot dog stand. Whether a building is a "decorated" shed or a "duck," there is a recognition that the forms selected can be the inspiration of the architect and not some architectural "truth." The Las Vegas Strip is composed of large signs, garish colors and buildings designed primarily to scream for attention from the passing car. This foretold the roadside architecture in many cities along the path of urban sprawl.

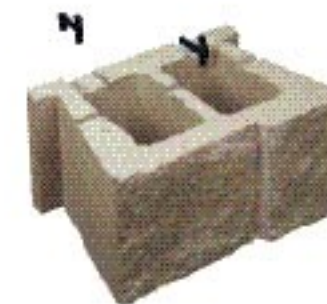
Through their observations, the authors define a new architectural genre. With the recognition of this new architecture comes a freedom to use all that has gone before and not simply be restricted to some particular "en vogue" philosophy of what architecture is all about.

In their view of Las Vegas, they recognize that the character which recalls or recognizes the past is somehow interesting and even exciting to people, who are seen as the



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marketplace for architecture. What the authors criticize is the symbolic context of the International Style and its architects' refusal to acknowledge symbolism. "The use of conventional elements in ordinary architecture (familiar forms taken from existing or even historic buildings) evokes associations from past experience. Symbolism is essential in architecture, the model from a previous time or from the existing city is part of the source material, and the replication of elements is part of the design method of this architecture."

The authors look at Las Vegas, where the signage is more important than the building. They note that, "Las Vegas is to the Strip what Rome is to the Piazza."

The Strip shows the value of symbolism and illusion in architecture...and proves that people, even architects, have fun with architecture that reminds them of something else, perhaps of ancient Rome or the Wild West.

This Strip was characterized by the sign,

the motel, service stations and casinos; changeable architecture that gives more homage to advertising than art.

As the authors state, "the Strip shows the value of symbolism and illusion in architecture...and proves that people, even architects, have fun with architecture that reminds them of something else, perhaps of ancient Rome or the Wild West...perhaps of the nation's New England forebearers...Illusion and comments, on the past or present or on our great common places are old cliches, and inclusion of every day in the environment, sacred and profane—these are what are lacking in present day modern architecture." We can learn them from Las Vegas.

"The Las Vegas Strip is not a chaotic sprawl but a set of activities whose pattern, as with other cities, depends on the technology of movement and communication and the economic value of land...it is a new pattern we have not yet understood."

What has happened in the 30 years since this book was written? There is, in fact, a new movement in architecture often referred to as "post-modernism," which brings with it the freedom to design "out-of-the-box." Mies and LeCorbusier would probably be shocked to see their protege Philip Johnson's "Chippendale High-Boy" tower in New York. The architecture foretold in this book ranges from the eclectic uses of historic style with its romantic imagery to totally new and sometimes incongruous forms like those of Frank Gehry.

How has Las Vegas learned from itself? Las Vegas has changed, but the message has become more compelling. Most of the buildings referred to in this book have been torn down and replaced or have been modified unrecognizably by layers of renovation. Many of the buildings have been imploded to make for Las Vegas continuously reinventing itself. Today, the parking lots are parking garages. The motels have become mega-resorts of up to 6,000 rooms and the signs have become bigger, brighter and more captivating with their high-tech changing images. In many cases, in fact, the buildings themselves have become sign as in the case of the Luxor (the recreation of the the great pyramid at Giza re-cast in bronze glass) and New York, New York, a collage of America's great city.

Las Vegas keeps moving on. It is now the most visited tourist city in the world, and the fastest growing city in the United States. It brags of a continuous stream of billion-dollar projects and the largest hotels in the world. New mega-resorts are being built on the Strip in Las Vegas, projects like the Venetian (a themed recreation of Venice), Paris (a themed recreation of the great French city), and

Bellagio (an Italian hillside town brought to the highest vision of taste). One might say it is theme-park architecture or the architecture of entertainment. Regardless, it is certainly a recognition that architecture is for people.

Downtown Fremont Street, like the "Main Street" of so many small American cities, has been "malled" for pedestrians. In this case, it was done in a way only Las Vegas can do it. The "Fremont Street Experience" is a covered canopy light show, a five-block-long television-like screen, presenting color images and music, straining gawkers' necks every hour.

While the authors may not have been able to visualize Las Vegas or other cities of today, they did make some startling observations that foretold a new architectural philosophy. What we see today is a recognition that architecture is for people and not for satisfying some mystical or esoteric truth. The architecture of fantasy is as much a part of the art of architecture as anything else. These recognitions have led to some of today's most interesting buildings.

It is ironic that main stream architects still don't consider Las Vegas as part of the known world. At best, they consider its buildings as "non-architecture." Nevertheless, the lessons of *Learning From Las Vegas* has, like it or not, indelibly impacted today's architecture. Some "radical" entertainment architecture like Universal City Walk and Disney's 42nd Street Redevelopment in New York seem to have learned a lot from Las Vegas.

We can still learn from Las Vegas; we can learn that architecture can be fun and whimsical, that architecture can be bold and brash, that architecture can be creative sculpture or have the play of interesting ornament. Foremost we can learn that architecture should be what it is intended to be—the art and science of creating places for people, places that enliven the spirit and touch the soul.