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# Learning from Mobility

From Iconography to Szeneography

An Interview with Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi

Sasha Cisar  
Jørg Himmelreich

## Architectural Theory

*Jørg Himmelreich: As well-known architects and authors of numerous books and essays, what degree of relevance would you give architectural theory? In your own work, how do you develop a theory and what role does it play in the design of the actual architecture?*

Robert Venturi: The main point of architecture is architecture. In other words, it calls for the design of a building as it relates to aesthetic expression, technical qualities and function. At a conference a few years ago, I spoke of architecture as akin to ‘frozen theory’ rather than ‘frozen music’. I said this because it was apparent at this time 15 years ago that theory had taken over among architects and thinkers – it was all anyone talked about. And I viewed all of this with a critical eye. About nine years ago I wrote an essay in a blog on the subject of ‘visions’. I cautioned against the tendency to be too visionary and too idealistic about architecture. The focus of architecture should be on creating and the creation of art.

I think theory is secondary – first and foremost, it is about the architecture. From there, you can always then theorize; and such theories may then assist you in more effectively creating architecture. But you have to be careful: Theory should remain secondary and should never be the source from which you directly derive the architecture. Architecture is derived from creating the art of architecture.

Denise Scott Brown: Architects are lucky that they have concrete problems. In fact, in the end all anyone ever worries about is his or her own talents, resolved into specific problems. Problems like how to fit a bathroom into a design keep us from being too inward-looking and provide a structure and a framework. Architects – unlike most other people – like going from the concrete to the abstract, conceptual or theoretical level. We ourselves particularly like going from the practical to the theoretical,

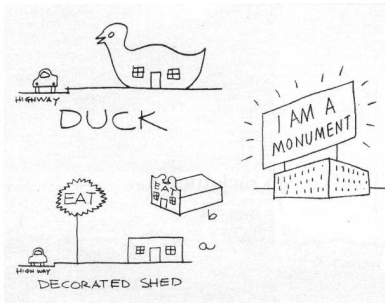
never getting too far from the real.

There are two ways of thinking: the ‘inductive’ and the ‘deductive’. The deductive approach starts with a preset thought – an ideology, for example, as often done in Modern Architecture. An ideology tells you certain things that blur the facts. The ideological approach is the opposite of the pragmatic. We believe it is better to start with a pragmatic problem rather than with presets that require application. Among other things, it leads to very dry architecture and stops the tension of creativity. Creativity comes from judging hard problems, rolling with the punches so to speak. If I allow myself to be diverted by the punches, I become preoccupied judging the theories rather than the problem. Architects do not think about the definitions of the words I so carefully use. For instance, what is the difference between a ‘theory’, ‘philosophy’, ‘principle’, ‘vision’, ‘ideology’, ‘ideal’, and ‘idea’? All of these words should be considered and defined by scholars or doctoral program. But this does not happen very often in architecture, which results in a mix-up between theory and practice.

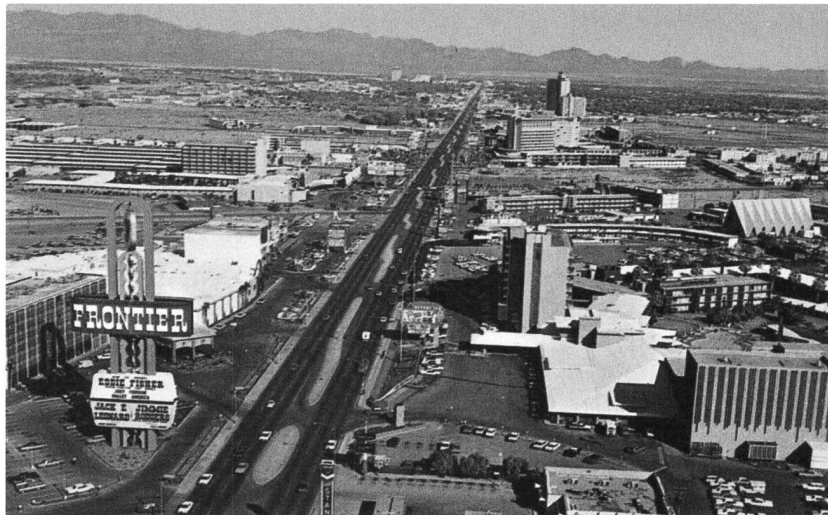
Robert and I love to hover between looking and learning, designing and then writing and teaching. We move between these three concepts in no real particular order. Quite often we learn something about theory by designing and sometimes it’s the other way around. But we always learn about how to design by looking around us, by learning from what we see. And that is what fills our lives in architecture.

## Analysis on Mobility

*JH: We would like to turn the discussion to the relation of mobility to architecture. The architecture of the previous century was strongly influenced by the emergence of the automobile. What impact do issues of mobility and traffic have on today’s architecture?*



The 'Duck' and 'Decorated Shed', from: Robert Venturi / Denise Scott Brown / Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge / Mass.: MIT Press 1972.



The Las Vegas Strip in the 1970s.

RV: This issue has undoubtedly been extremely important to us for many years. We originally set off for Las Vegas back in the late 1960s to take a look at this automobile city. We were planning to go to Los Angeles, which was the city of the automobile at the time. But by heading to Las Vegas, we were going against the predominant ideal of the time: Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse*, a concept for a city that consisted, more or less, of a park interspersed with high-rise flats.

Our interest was in taking a closer look at communities. We sought to analyze the architectural aesthetic derived from the automobile. How do you perceive architecture from a seat of moving car? This was especially important to Americans whose lives were dominated by the car. It wasn't the gambling industry that brought us to Las Vegas – it was the 'Strip'. The Strip was no longer the 'Main Street' geared at pedestrians and slow driving cars. The city's architecture was no longer viewed from the angle of the pedestrian strolling 4 mph, as in great Renaissance cities, but rather from the perspective of the car driver. The uses of the Strip were urban but separated from one other. This city of the automobile seemed to be characterized by scale and symbolism. In the 1960s, the Las Vegas Strip was characterized by big signage and parking lots with buildings set far back behind them. We noticed that the scale got bigger and signage has once again become very important. Its importance actually goes all the way back to the hieroglyphic signs seen all over buildings and columns in Ancient Egypt. In the U.S. advertising was akin to a religion, comparable to the early Christian interiors in Ravenna or the stained glass windows of gothic architecture. The point we want to make is that it was here that we learned to understand symbolism; we then brought the idea of it back into architecture. It had been pushed aside, in a sense, by architecture that had become increasingly abstract and expressionistic by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The aesthetic of abstract form evolved

into the predominate art form, what we call 'abstract expressionism'. So the idea of symbolism in architecture was forgotten for a time. But we discovered that it still existed, it had just shifted its context to that of the automobile city. In Las Vegas, we learned that signage and symbolism had once again taken on importance, through our observations and descriptions we were able to bring some ideas back into the architecture discourse.

There are two main kinds of symbolism: the 'decorated shed', a simple building with ornament on it or signage; and what we call the 'duck', named after a stall in the shape of a duck that we once saw along the highway on Long Island, New York that really stood out. So either the building itself is a sculpture or symbol or a symbol is applied to it. We discovered that these types have a big influence on how American cities are configured today and that is why we came up with the idea that signage and symbolism in and of themselves are relevant.

*JH: When Learning from Las Vegas came out forty years ago, it set a milestone for defining the relation between traffic and architecture and the perception of the urban context from within a car. The book generated a general debate. How have architecture and urban planning changed since then and what impact has your book had?*

DSB: It is important to point out that the city is not only defined from the perspective of the moving car. However, it taught us a great deal about the relationship of the car and the person in the car to the architecture. It also informed us a lot about architecture in general – not just what you see from inside the car. It sounds as if the whole idea started with us, but has long antecedents.

We once attended an international retreat down south in the U.S. and discovered a yoga temple there. It became apparent as we viewed the temple that the architects had 'learned from Las Vegas'. When we later joined the group at the retreat, it just so happened that the architects who had designed the temple were there. They were amazed



Robert Venturi, house for Vanna Venturi, *Mother's House*, Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, 1962, photo.

to see us. They told us that their idea for the building had been directly derived from what I had written about Las Vegas. We let them know that this was very clear. It was a thrilling experience for us all. And yet the concept was not at all based on the car because there were no cars anywhere around – you walked everywhere. Their design had to do with successive perception and stages of entry into a building rich with symbolic content. That was lovely for us to see.

*JH: So did the readers grasp the point of your analysis of Las Vegas and its iconic aspects?*

DSB: I have to say that some had misunderstood *Learning from Las Vegas*. Some took it to be a blunt statement for the commercialization of architecture or as an argument for copying historic architectural styles.

But in fact the contrary was the case. We sought to make symbolism an integral component of a modern design concept. The iconic aspect was meant to have a function, to make a building work in a modernistic way, e.g. by guiding movements.

But it was necessary for us to realize that the word 'symbolism' can mean two things. Our generation of architects got miles down in the kind of 'Postmodernism' I call 'PoMo', a commercialization of postmodern ideas. Not all ideas, but definitely the ideological and social ideas got bankrupted by people like Philip Johnson and Robert Stern into very specious architecture. That is why among others, the 'Neo-Modernists' (who go in a clearly different direction) say that if that is what we stand for, you cannot learn anything from us. But I think that the Neo-Modernists are going in an even more 'PoMo' direction than the original Postmodernists did. We draw this opinion from the fact that their buildings are more like big sculptures than anything rational. Their buildings are even more commercial, vapid, and less functional than postmodern works. And yet, they still want to call themselves 'Anti-Postmodernist'.

We have been told, however, that the younger generation makes a distinction between 'PoMo' and the analysis and

projects we did. And instead of being interested in the 'Neo-Modernists' (who are getting the very large contracts now), they are again interested in the Smithsons and us. Surely they are interested in the ideas of Rem Koolhaas, but our feeling is that they are just beginning to learn what we really stood for in our analyses. Take the analysis of mobility, for example, which went beyond the question of mobility to examine how architecture is generated in many respects.

Given the fact that modern architecture has what I believe to be a good thesis, it needs to be updated to fit a new world. For example, the evolution of technology has given rise to new electronics and movement systems. It is very important to think about how they have altered appliances in many ways. In addition to mobility, we now need electronic mobility – put the two together and they turn global in all sorts of ways. It is fascinating to think of what the next generation will do with these ideas.

There is a group of young architects in Madrid – probably some of the most interesting architects in their country – who go by the name BASURAMA, derived from the Spanish word 'basura', which means 'garbage' or 'waste'. They have done some very fascinating things with the idea of re-using waste as a creative medium in architecture. They contacted us because they felt that having studied Las Vegas, we might perhaps know a great deal about waste and creative ways of artistically rethinking our approach to dealing with waste. I gave them a lecture on "The Art in Waste"<sup>1</sup> and it was really helpful for the group.

Others have come to us because they found out that we are open to other methods outside of the traditional approaches to research in architecture. In the universities where we teach, we find not only architects but also others interested in our methods because they are more creative than the standard approaches to scientific research. Now we have scientists asking us about our ways of researching, interested in us giving a lecture on how they can learn to apply the studio as a research vehicle based on the Las Vegas Studio.



VSABA, *Trabant University Center*, University of Delaware, photos.



*Sasha Cisar: When you analyzed the relationship of different programs, such as traffic and entertainment in Learning from Las Vegas 40 years ago, you found architecture that bordered streets and parking lots. They were close to each other in relation but still separated.*

*When you look at recent works of Dutch offices like OMA or UN Studio, there are projects that interweave programs like mobility, living and working into hybrid and intricate units. Is this interweaving of spaces for traffic with all other functions a logical further development of the phenomenon you described?*

DSB: People have taken issue with and analyzed that relationship, which we shaped as integral, in places people did not like to look at such as commercial retail. I do not know what many Dutch people are up to, but I do know from my correspondence with Maurice Hartevelde<sup>2</sup> in Rotterdam, that he is taking the analogies we derived of the Nolli map of Rome in the Las Vegas Studio, and he is dealing with public space inside buildings as a ‘street’ running through it. We love it. That idea comes partly from Las Vegas, but partly from some of Louis Kahn’s studies such as the famous ‘streets as infrastructure’ and ‘the street as architecture’. He used this idea in part in academic buildings. Furthermore David Crane, a sociologist asked us: “Why do you scorn the cities of the southwest? Those are the ones people like.”

We put that all together, as well as studies of urban transportation, urban economics, and engineers’ theses, in order to write a system of thinking about the inside of buildings. We can even reuse some transportation planning inside buildings in the same way we took the Nolli map of Rome inside buildings.

And now Maurice Hartevelde is carrying out a parallel set of studies in Europe, particularly of traditional arcades; he analyzes which of those work and which don’t. He is also interested in shopping malls, where the only interesting space is inside and the parking lot is dead. Maurice is also trying to establish a balance between the public interior and exterior. He is trying to connect the

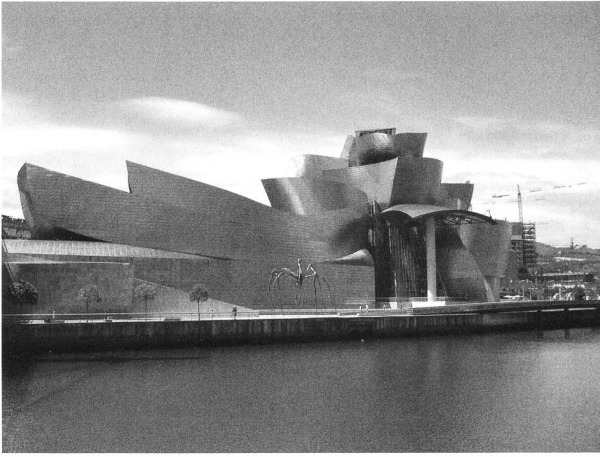
spaces sequentially in such a way that the whole system – very often a pedestrian system – turns into a kind of street that runs through a campus. He is analyzing how that sequence runs along the pedestrian parkway, through the building and on to the next parkway, establishing a network.

#### Projects Focusing on Mobility

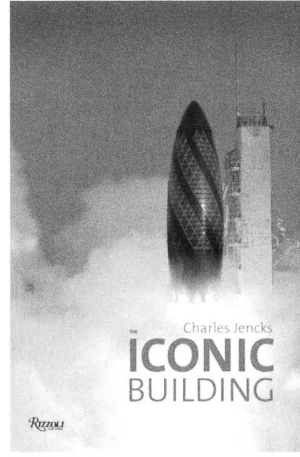
*JH: Is there a particular project you have been working on recently that deals with the theme of mobility? Is there a particular one that takes up the idea of how to link mobility and a project you made?*

DSB: Well, all of them do. If you look at the plan and sections of Robert’s *Mother’s House* – the very first project Robert did – you will see that a street is running through that little building. It starts out with a very public part – the driveway off the major street; it meets the facade, which is like a billboard, which it penetrates; you come into the public sector of the house, which is marked out by the floor of the dining room and by the stairway; the ‘street’ itself here is more like a ‘sidewalk’, it goes all the way through and up the ‘nowhere stair’ and leads to the roof of the building; carefully marked as a public sector, you realize a distinction to the private spaces of the house.

As was the case with this first little project, we deal with mobility when we work on large-scale projects. We produce a Nolli map for every campus we work on. It’s interesting that the computerization of the spatial information about the campus allows us to digitalize such a map fairly easily. We make a network of exterior routes, particularly those that are pedestrian, and then the routes through the buildings. After that, we see whether the whole puzzle fits together and whether it relates to the intellectual layout of the campus. We study how it relates to the intellectual heart of the campus – the humanities, the sciences, research in medicine – hoping to then tie it all together into a network of pedestrian spaces and internal public spaces.



Frank Gehry, *Guggenheim Museum*, Bilbao, 1993–1997, photo.



Charles Jencks, *Iconic Building*, New York: Rizzoli 2005, cover.

RV: In terms of buildings we have done, we might mention two in particular that relate to building campus architecture. Both are what one refers to as a campus center in the U.S., and all though not of great importance, the place where students meet up, have a meal, purchase things, or attend a lecture. It makes an institution out of the university, not just a campus. We did the *Trabant Center* for the University of Delaware. It is not merely a center, but ironically a path that connects different points on the outside of the university with the campus path system. So if you are walking along you might incidentally pass through here and meet some of your friends by chance, enhancing thereby the sense of community. Ironically, it then functions less as a center than a pathway that is outfitted with restaurants, shops, community rooms, meeting places as well as auditoriums. We made the center look more or less like a street furnished with the usual signage and neon lighting, making it vivid. Neon lighting is very unusual medium to use on an American campus. American campuses tend to be more rural rather than urban.

DSB: The *Trabant Center* serves as the major route between the dormitories and the classrooms, even the major route on the campus. Students have to at least pass by it or go through it when they first head out in the morning and when they return to the dorm at the end of the day. It does not appear to be at the center of campus but it is the major access route between the existing campus and the development of the new campus. And in any case, it has turned around the lines of the campus and become a major meeting place because it is along the commonly taken route. It has not been arbitrarily placed.

RV: The second building I would like to mention is the *Frist Campus Center* at Princeton University. It is an adaptation of an addition to the former physics building. It is now the campus center. We ran a pathway through

that enables it to also serve as a shortcut. It connects to an exterior arcade at the north elevation and to a covered arcade on the south side. So you do not really go to the center to meet friends, but more or less walk through it on your way somewhere else. Along the way, you can stop off for lunch or incidentally meet people while heading to attend a lecture.

DSB: There's a third example that I am very pleased with – the University of Michigan, a 3'000-acres campus. The major problem there, discovered at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and mentioned 1916 in the first plans is the absence of a connection running between the medical center and the main campus. As we investigated the plans, we noticed that the level systems were strange due to the fact that, now dry, there had once been an ancient lake located there. We realized that we could span flat bridges right across that hole and hold about 960 cars beneath. In this way, we could link the center of the academic campus with the research center of the medical campus in a very direct manner.

It would even be possible to link the town, its center and its theater and arts district to this site. At the junction where those two paths meet – we call it the *meeting of minds* – you can follow your regular route across the road, passing a cafe enclosed in glass that appears to float up in the air, through which you can see and spot friends or look beyond to the medical center.

On the site of the main campus center we put a life sciences lab and an instruction building for the sciences as well as a designated open area. When the construction fences had not yet been done, we received a message that students had broken into the area and were using our shortcuts without concern for whether it was allowed or not. When we went to check it out, we saw the students sitting just the way we had hoped they would, even though we hadn't provided benches for them, only ledges.



Times Square, New York, photo.

RV: We were hoping that people in the community would meet up in an incidental rather than intentional manner. If you tell students where they have to meet up, they certainly will not do it. But if you manage to create an overall circulation system for the university that leaves room for things to just happen, then places to meet and alcoves to sit in and talk will appear all across campus and really be used.

DSB: When we design, we draw analogies to streets, or sometimes to expressways or market streets. In this case, I was thinking of medieval street patterns, particularly the ones in Venice. These are fascinating and rather like some of the Middle Eastern ones. The streets are no wider than is necessary for the volume of the vehicles and pedestrians passing through. It widens at access places such as meeting places, but it is a very organic system. It is not the kind of monumental streets that we sometimes work with. This was the analogy we applied to the University of Michigan. We also planned to pick up the pattern of the existing pedestrian parkway, which looks like a kind of macramé pattern.<sup>3</sup>

### From Iconography to the Electronic Age

JH: We would like to shift the focus of the interview to the role of iconography in architecture. We have already made mention of it. We would like to read you a thesis we formulated and perhaps you could then comment on it and let us know whether you agree or disagree: We think that there has been an evolution of iconic architecture from generic boxes with iconic billboards in front (which you describe as ‘decorated sheds’ in *Learning from Las Vegas* and which were based on the recognition of the city from within a car) to structures like the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao by Frank Gehry, which no longer addresses the local car driver, but rather the global tour-

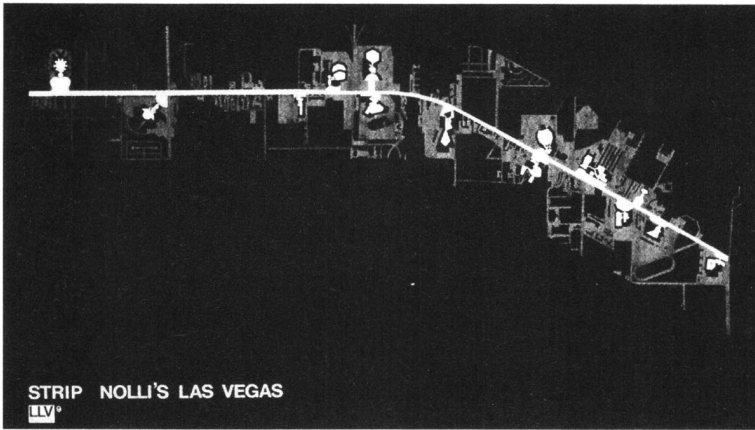
ism market, drawing in visitors as an iconic image transported across the globe by media of every kind.

We consider buildings with complex shapes and intricate interior spaces such as the Guggenheim Museum to reflect a new development in the line of iconic buildings at a totally different scale. We think that this evolutionary process is a result of the desire to create as emotionally charged buildings as possible, to make all its components iconic in an endeavor to catch international attention. Would you agree?

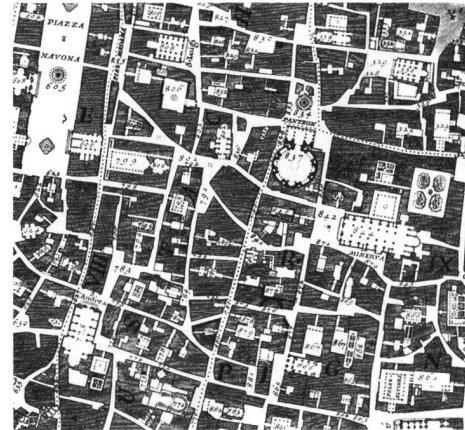
RV: I agree that in the last year many sculptural, expressionistic buildings were erected. But I disagree with your way of seeing them as a contemporary step in the evolution of iconic architecture like the ‘decorated shed’. Not only a few new buildings, but most of modernism (which constitutes most of architecture) is designed like abstract expressionist sculptures. And since these are abstract sculptures, they become iconic. But their outer shape does not really correspond to the building interiors and their specific functions, at times even contradicting them. We think that a building is first and foremost a place of shelter; iconography is secondary. This is different in Bilbao’s *Guggenheim* – the building is chiefly a sculpture, which makes it odd.

SC: You classify the Guggenheim Museum an expressionistic sculpture, which might become iconic. Charles Jencks, in contrast, sees in such sculptural qualities a premise for a building to be iconic.<sup>4</sup>

DSB: I think expressionistic buildings have iconography. But it is the iconography of a sculptural exterior – as Robert said – which is in conflict with the non-functional interior. The atrium of the *Guggenheim*, for example, cost a great deal of money, but it tends to separate rather than join functions. I think this development is interesting, but is ultimately not valid and I will tell you why:



VSBA, *Nolli-map* of Las Vegas.



Giambattista Nolli, *Nolli map* of Rome, 1748.

The sensual *Bilbao* is hot-tempered; I think people just love that contrast of the “book torn around” and then the “storm of silver that landed from Mars.” There is no second impression. The first impression is all that matters – there is no other dimension.

*JH:* So it is just producing an ephemeral effect in order to drag global tourists there, but it will not stimulate a development that will endure?

*DCS:* Right. They brought all the tourists down on that site. For me *Bilbao* is a ‘cargo drop’. One building only – not for anything else. The next building will not have the same effect. It works once. That is why it’s not very important. But it is not enough to build a small ‘landing strip’ for tourists; to make the interest last you need to build a real ‘airport’. But with only this one building, ten years from now it will no longer be interesting.

*RV:* We find this expressionistic development to be a dead end. The evolution of iconic architecture has headed in another direction.

Today, signage is no longer electric, it is electronic, and therefore, in terms of its design, can effectively change its ornamental effect and content. *Time Square* in New York is a place in the world where this is visible. I would say that *Time Square* has become the equivalent of the ‘piazza’. It is like a contemporary version of public spaces such as *Piazza San Marco* in Venice. Already – not only in a spatial sense but also in terms of its iconographic qualities. The iconography of today is that of electronic and what we call LED. That is why we think *Bilbao* is old-fashioned sculpture. At the moment, we still think that it is not the dramatic form of a building that counts, but rather the dramatic surface, which is like a large screen. We consider buildings that utilize electronic media as valid steps forward in the evolution of iconic architecture.

*DSB:* Put another way, the original Las Vegas iconography that we depicted has certainly evolved over time into what I would call ‘contraption iconography’. These new developments are made to respond to the mechanics of another piece of the system: the eye. So Las Vegas and its signs were really contraptions, in a sense, that corresponded with the contraptions of the eye. And they did so in the same way that any tool does: that is the beauty of it. I love analyzing them because they all look like tools. That is a real modernist thing to do. Now, there has indeed been some evolution to a certain extent, that is, a ‘Neo-Mo’, which I think is the ‘PoMo’ of ‘PoMo’. I think that this Neo-Modernism is just another form of ‘PoMo’ because they have produced ‘ducks’. In other words there have always been ‘ducks’ in architecture, because the sculpture on the outside has often been more important than what is on the inside. The Neo-Modernists have produced a series of ‘modern architecture styled ducks’, which in other ways are not very functional.

*SC:* To wind up this part about iconography, one last, more general question: Would you say that architecture is the medium or the media? Does architecture produce images or do we project our own images onto it?

*DCB:* Well, that has been debated in architectural circles for a long, long time. Architecture very often projects ‘images of architecture’: All of Renaissance architecture projected images of Roman structures, although the buildings themselves were not structural. They were only ‘talking’ about structure. So literally, their metaphorical ‘construction’ was a central part of the culture. Today, we are very far from that. When you as an architect project images of your own profession, you are most often addressing other architects. But the rest of society is not very interested in your messages. It is not the same today as it was for Michelangelo or the architects in the Gothic





Venetian Hotel, Las Vegas, 1999.

period. They could have projected images from other fields onto architecture, like the structure of heaven or the nature of the hierarchy of saints. They thought about how to integrate it between columns, windows, or walls and things like that. So in their work as architects there has been an oscillation between ‘communication about architecture’ and a ‘communication between architecture and other subjects’ like religion. Today there is only a discourse on architecture as the main message. On the other hand, we think all architects have a right to have a little debate going on with their own colleagues about their building within the building, but still should consider aspects beyond their profession.

RV: I agree. I also think that the content of iconography today should not be architectural. It should be other things and there is a whole history of that in architecture. Lets say in the Renaissance, the Gothic, the early Christian, or the Egyptian architecture: In all these examples architecture served as a framework to apply many other iconic messages. But the point is that today architecture is referring too much to itself. This is boring. We should be beyond that because we are no longer in the industrial age. This is the information age! All kinds of information is available to be handed out – you can do it and you should do it – and architecture should accommodate to that.

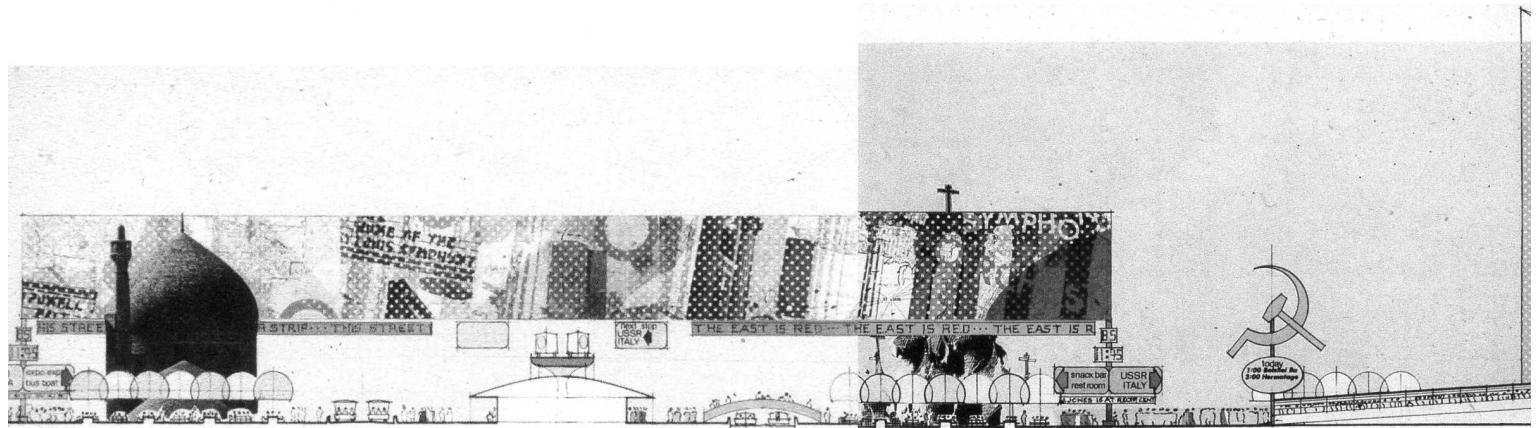
DSB: I think that the irony is that the more we go for electronic sources, the more the architects want the imag-

ery of their (media-)facades to be in the hands of graphic designers. We hand this over to people we never meet. But the graphic system could be used by architects in many different ways. So on one level, passing it on to an external set of hands takes the creativity away from the architect. On the other hand, the façades are not the only level of communication. The building itself and the ‘shed’ part is still open to many ways of giving information about the building. Here you can still express information like: “This is a hospital, not a school!” or “There is a subfloor”. These are possibilities for communication many architects ignore.

## Las Vegas II – Scenography

JH: In your interview with Rem Koolhaas in *Content*, you describe a shift from iconography to ‘scenography’.<sup>5</sup> What would you say is ‘scenography’? Do you think we have left a phase of iconographic design and are headed towards scenographic design, or is this phenomenon limited to Las Vegas or theme parks?

DSB: That is certainly another evolution (besides the trend in expressionistic sculptures) with which we do not agree. It is one that occurs in Las Vegas itself. Hotels and resorts have gone from ‘iconography’ to designing ‘scenography’. They have turned into Disneyland-like theme parks. We do not think this is the right direction to go in and there are many ironies about it. Although they imitate



VSBA, *International Bicentennial Exposition Master Plan Project*, 1971–72, sectional drawing.

the public spaces of old European towns, they are becoming more and more private. In fact there is nothing public left about them.

RV: Though they are reminiscent of known urban spaces, they are not urban at all. It is ‘dramatic iconography’, as Denise has said. They are working essentially as a stage, as scenery. It is as if I am sitting in the auditorium and looking at the stage scenery. It would be urban if they would keep it in the auditorium so you could walk through it.

SC: *Although you think the scenographic approach in Las Vegas is not convincing, could we still understand your gateway project for the Bicentennial Celebration in Philadelphia (which was meant to serve as a new entry-way and guiding system within the city) as an attempt at establishing a scenographic route?*<sup>6</sup> *While expressionistic buildings such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao or the scenographic hotel fronts in Las Vegas seem to compete with their surroundings, your project for Philadelphia seems to intentionally support the city, emphasize its qualities, and stimulate spatial interactions.*

RV: I would say that the journey is more important than the destination. If you go to Chartres, for example, you go there to see the cathedral essentially, but the surrounding city is beautiful and relevant all the same. That is why I feel more comfortable thinking that the way to a place is the final, perhaps more effective, destination than the building itself.

While developing our project for Philadelphia, we took a closer look at the American system of signage and found that it is based on two existing systems: The first uses big billboards in a completely commercial sense to communicate with passing cars along the highway. The second

works with the signs that straddle the highways; you especially see them in Los Angeles. Mostly green, they float over you and inform you that in a mile and a half there will be an exit to Route 38. They warn you ahead of time and provide you with practical information.

Our idea was similarly based on the idea of establishing two kinds of billboards – one that contains commercial, persuasive information and another that contains practical information about where to find certain places, etc.

We decided that within the project for *Philadelphia’s Bicentennial Celebration* in 1976, we could use both of these elements: billboards could be not only commercial, but also specific. The elements could not only be providing you with directions but also be more specific and contain aesthetic information or effects. So we are always learning from what already exists, from the commonplace as well as by modifying it.

One billboard announced an exhibition at the *Philadelphia Museum of Art* while another billboard a bit further down the highway advertised a particular sandwich available at the fast food chain Wendys – allowing everyday culture to combine with high culture. So the idea to combine and intermix these two aspects into one system was the main theme of our design there.

### Las Vegas III – Return to Old-fashioned Modernism

JH: *So what is the current architectural trend in resort development in Las Vegas? Are the newest projects still decorated sheds with scenery applied to them?*

DSB: I think Las Vegas has already left the phase of scenography. There is a shift and a trend towards modernism, which is taking over. I heard the investor Steve Wynn say that the next casino he does in Las Vegas shouldn’t com-



Wynn Hotel, Las Vegas, opened 2008.

municate in any way with the Strip. He wants it to be “a green mountain on the boulevard”. The buildings they seem to be supporting now are mere modern, signature buildings by famous, modern architects. They think that will draw people. But I think they are very wrong.

The irony is that when a building is done by a famous architect and looks very avant-garde in the old-fashioned way, it does not draw tenants. Only signature architecture will bring Wynn tenants. You will now find very exclusive buildings with high-class luxury in Las Vegas. What you see on the streets is a landscape that tries to give an increasing whisper of that exclusive environment that you, too, could join – if you pay enough money.

They hope that this will be an antidote to the current Las Vegas, which people appreciate. They try to rewind Las Vegas way back to the 1960s. But people will eventually get bored of modern architecture, as their grandparents did in the 1960s. I hate to be in an environment that is recreating a similar boredom within the next decade.

RV: The irony in that situation is that they are going in this direction because they are all afraid of being vulgar. They want to get away from the idea of Las Vegas as a vulgar place, but that’s exactly why it has such great vitality and why it was so popular in many ways. Now they are trying to gentrify Las Vegas, make it high-class, and in the process are very likely destroying it.

### Learning from Bob and Denise

SC: *We have one final, off-topic question: Your son is working on a movie titled Learning from Bob and Denise. When can we expect this documentary to come out in movie theaters?*

DSB: Soon, so be on the lookout!

- 1 Denise Scott Brown, “The Art and Waste”, lecture for the Urban Distortions course, Basurama06, Madrid, 4th of May 2006, compare: [http://www.basurama.org/b06\\_distorsiones\\_urbanas\\_scott\\_brown\\_e.htm](http://www.basurama.org/b06_distorsiones_urbanas_scott_brown_e.htm), retrieved September 2009.
- 2 Maurice Hartevelde is a PhD student at Technische Universiteit Delft. He has researched on various public spaces like arcades, malls, department stores, train stations, or walk ways.
- 3 Robert Venturi / Denise Scott Brown, *Architectural as Signs and Systems. For a Mannerist time*, Cambridge / Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2004.
- 4 Charles Jencks, *Iconic Buildings*, New York: Rizzoli 2005.
- 5 Rem Koolhaas / Hans Ulbrich Obrist, “Re-Learning from Las Vegas. Interview with Denise Scott Brown & Robert Venturi”, in: AMO / OMA / Rem Koolhaas, *Content*, Köln: Taschen 2004, p. 150–157.
- 6 The *International Bicentennial Exposition Master Plan Project* was developed for the Bicentennial Celebration in Philadelphia, 1971–72.

The interview was conducted via telephone between Zurich and Philadelphia. Venturi and Denise Scott Brown are architects in Philadelphia. They lead the office VSBA. Sasha Cisar is *transeditor* and student for architecture at ETH Zurich. Jörg Himmelreich ist architekt and historian. He is *transeditor*, works as author, lektor und assistant at the chair for Architecture and Design of Professor Marc Angélil at ETH Zurich.