

"DOING IT DEADPAN"

Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's Learning from Las Vegas

ABSTRACT

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) – a collection of the architects' studies of the Las Vegas Strip, a segment of U.S. Route 91 – is packed with information graphics. The designer Muriel Cooper conveys the vividness of the Strip to the reader by aerial photographs, snapshots, signage, diagrams, all manner of maps, plans, elevations, sections, heraldry, graphs, sketches, charts and lists. Viewed randomly or in succession, these elements visually reconstruct Las Vegas as the epitome of the commercial roadside environment rich with signs. Considered from this perspective, *Learning from Las Vegas* exemplifies what the statistician and information designer Edward Tufte refers to as "escaping the flatland [of two-dimensions] and enriching the density of data displays" so that those displays are compatible, to whatever extent possible, with our lived experiences.

— In 1972 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour published *Learning from Las Vegas*, a collection of studies, designed by Scott Brown, and drawn from the architects' Yale studio seminar on the Las Vegas Strip in the fall of 1968.¹ The book is packed with informational graphics: aerial photographs, snapshots, signage, diagrams, all manner of maps, plans, elevations, sections, heraldry, graphs, sketches, charts and lists.

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The "Preface" to the first edition explains in some detail the structure of the seminar. Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. 1972. *Learning from Las Vegas*. Cambridge: MIT Press, xi.

These graphic images—mostly influenced by media studies, sociology, urban studies and pop art—visually reconstruct Las Vegas as the epitome of the commercial roadside environment.

According to the authors, the Las Vegas Strip spontaneously disclosed its own patterns of use and value. How to transfer the vivid disorderliness of the Strip—its semantic dimensionality—to, or transform into, the two dimensional format of a book was, however, a central problem for the authors.

Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's initial intention was, in Scott Brown's words, to "do it deadpan," to allow Las Vegas to reveal itself and not to be upstaged by the design of the book.² Nevertheless, the art director for MIT

Press, Muriel Cooper, had a different idea of what form *Learning from Las Vegas* should take. And, as it turned out, Cooper's design sensibility was not to the authors' liking.

The disagreement surrounding the first edition's design prompted the publication, in 1977, of Scott Brown's redesigned and revised edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*. The

reformatted 1977 edition—its miniaturization, its random placement of images, its conventional typographic layout—thoroughly dismantled Cooper's original design of *Learning from Las Vegas* and thus, I hope to demonstrate, rendered its visual form at odds with its textual content.

The potential visual potency of *Learning from Las Vegas*—the manner in which either the 1972 edition or the revised and redesigned 1977 edition mobilize all kinds of informational devices to inculcate its audience—was nicely summed up in Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's query: "How do you represent the strip as perceived by Mr. A rather than as a piece of geometry?"³ Cooper's response, made manifest in her lively design, envisions the intensity of the Las Vegas strip. Unlike Cooper, Scott Brown's response articulated in her redesign for the revised edition, which according to her is more in keeping with the authors' original intention of "doing it deadpan," attempts to maintain an aura of objectivity and a tone of scholarly dispassion. Scott Brown's design strategy of letting Las Vegas reveal itself through the uncolored presentation of data is in keeping with what the historians of science Lorainne Daston and Peter Galison have identified, in their "The Image of Objectivity" (1992), as the ideology of the nineteenth-century scientific atlas, a paradigm for scientific representation and mechanical documentation of nature.⁴

The nineteenth-century faith in objectivity, according to Galison, in his follow-up article "Judgment Against Objectivity" (1998), was contested by the advent of

² Denise Scott Brown, telephone interview with author, January 26, 2003.

³ Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 15.

⁴ Galison, Peter and Lorainne Daston. Autumn 1992. "The Image of Objectivity." *Representations* 0 (40): 81-128.

twentieth-century subjective judgment or “subjective evaluation.” Subjective judgment, as Galison explains, is acquired through professional and aesthetic training that prepares one to make appropriate discernments and active decisions which mere mechanical documentation is incapable of performing.⁵ Cooper’s design judgments, informed by professional training, exemplify what the statistician and information designer Edward Tufte, in his book *Envisioning Information*, refers to as “escaping the

5 /
Galison, Peter. 1998. “Judgment Against Objectivity.” In *Picturing Science Producing Art*. C. A. Jones and P. Galison, editors with A. Slaton. New York and London: Routledge, 347.

6 /
Tufte, Edward R. 1990. *Envisioning Information*. Cheshire, CT: Graphic Press, 2.

flatland [of two-dimensions] and enriching the density of data displays.”⁶ According to Tufte, escaping the impoverished flatland of two-dimensional informational displays requires the *enhancement* of data—the creation of density, complexity and dimensionality—so that experiences with information (as

communication, as documentation, as preservation) flow in a familiar way, a way that discloses to the reader something of her experiences of the three-dimensional world, the world that she bodily inhabits. The notion that a design should enhance data is in keeping with what Galison has referred to as a “judgment against objectivity” or a withdrawal from the early modernist faith in the veracity of unaided imaging.

The apparent incommensurability of subjective judgment and objectivity instantiated in the differences between the dynamic (or subjective) first edition and the deadpan (or objective) revised edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* are further complicated by the fact that Cooper’s design is in keeping with the subject matter of the author’s text. In fact, it is my contention that, in spite of Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour’s misgivings and Scott Brown’s redesign, Cooper’s design fully realizes the authors’ desire to image the city in textual and visual representations that establish identifiable sets of schematic instructions to construct corresponding images of Las Vegas in the mind. It was, in fact, Cooper, not Scott Brown, who represented “the strip as perceived by Mr. A rather than as a piece of geometry.”

This aspect of the origin and function of *Learning from Las Vegas*, however, has been largely ignored by commentators—chiefly Jean Francois Lyotard, Umberto Eco,

Charles Jenks and, most famously, Frederic Jameson—who have concentrated instead on ways in which the book theorized a postmodern architecture. *Learning from Las Vegas* was at the crux of Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) where he situated postmodernism "as a kind of aesthetic populism." Aesthetic populism is certainly an acknowledged aspect of *Learning from Las Vegas*. Postmodernism, however, is not *Learning from Las Vegas*' operative paradigm. Rather, as the various disassociations and intersections that exist between the design and publication of the 1972 edition and the redesign and revised publication of the 1977 edition bear out, the crux of *Learning from Las Vegas* is the critical tension that exists between Scott Brown's early modernist notions of objectivity and Cooper's late modernist notions of subjective judgment. To develop my argument that Cooper graphically realized the main thrust of Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas*, I draw upon two influential publications as well as on Venturi and Scott Brown's (with an emphasis on Scott Brown) early writings leading up to the publication of *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972.

I.

Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* first addressed envisioned information as it relates to mental pictures and experiences of the urban environment. Published in 1960, *The Image of the City* advocated an approach to urban planning that capitalized on the kinds of cognitive maps (or mental pictures) that visitors and native inhabitants formed from traversing the existing city (Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles were his case studies). Lynch considered "the visual quality of the American city by studying the mental image of that city which is held by

its citizens."⁷¹ The accumulation of mental images of the city had, not surprisingly, great imaginary potential, according to Lynch. Under these ideal circumstances, he wrote, "The common hopes and pleasures,

the sense of community may be made flesh." The city had to be "visibly organized and sharply identified" before any comprehensive mental picture—or image—

⁷¹ Lynch, Kevin. 1960. *The Image of the City*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 2. It seems to me that the study of mental imagery is a rather difficult task that belies something of the metaphysics of Lynch's project.

could arise. Only then could the city dweller invest the city with her "own meanings and connections," and thereby establish a sense of place for herself.⁸

In addition to the precedent set by Lynch's *Image of the City*, Joseph R. Passonneau and Richard Saul Wurman's *Urban Atlas: 20 American Cities: A Communication Study Notating Selected Urban Data at a Scale of 1:48,000* was likewise a source of inspiration, or, more likely an excuse to mull over the challenges inherent to escaping flatland. Published in 1966, the *Urban Atlas*—a collection of maps juxtaposed with income and density distribution data—was reviewed by Scott Brown in the Spring 1968 issue of *Landscape*. Acknowledging the utility and elegance of the

8 /
Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 92.

9 /
Scott Brown, Denise. 1968. "Mapping the City: Symbols and Systems." *Landscape* 17:3,22. See also Wurman, Richard Saul and Joseph R. Passonneau. 1966. *Urban Atlas: 20 American Cities: A Communication Study Notating Selected Urban Data at a Scale of 1:48,000*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.

10 /
Scott Brown, "Mapping the City: Symbols and Systems," 23.

11 /
Scott Brown, "Mapping the City: Symbols and Systems," 24.

12 /
Scott Brown, "Mapping the City: Symbols and Systems," 24.

Urban Atlas, Scott Brown wrote, "A graphic representation of urban phenomena can help visually-minded people perceive and understand complex but ordered relationships in the city as no table or verbal description could."⁹ The *Urban Atlas*'s evocative use of graphic elements and layers of color were, as far as she was concerned, an "important step in the development of an urban design and city planning theory and methodology."¹⁰

Scott Brown focused her attention on the perceptual impact of the maps—the use of gradations of color and graphic devices to produce synoptic views of urban dynamics—

contained within the atlas, comparing the design method to the sensorial affects of Op Art. Color theory, psychology and physiology, as Scott Brown stated in her review, were all pertinent to the "investigation of mapping methods and printing technologies."¹¹

While Scott Brown identified a number of positive attributes (she went so far as to suggest that the atlas would be "a good buy for collectors of modern art"), she believed that the atlas failed on two points.¹² First, despite its affinities with Op Art, the *Urban Atlas* did not fully capitalize on the "eye's ability to read gradations in intensity quickly [...]." And, second, although visually exciting, the atlas was static in its "one-shot character [...]." In order to ratchet-up the experiential component

of the atlas, Scott Brown recommended the use of cinematography to show the dynamic patterning of the growth of the city.¹³ Such an addition, she advised, would further invigorate an already affective graphic means of communicating the existing life of the urban environment.

13 /
Scott Brown, "Mapping the City: Symbols and Systems," 24.

14 /
Appleyard, Donald, Kevin Lynch and John R. Myer. 1964. *The View from the Road*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 34.

15 /
Appleyard, Lynch and Meyer, *The View from the Road*, 62.

16 /
Scott Brown, Denise and Robert Venturi. 1968. "A Significance for A&P Parking Lots or Learning from Las Vegas." *Architectural Forum*: 37.

The use of cinematography for the study of the city was first introduced in 1964 by Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch and John R. Myer's *The View from the Road*, a monographic study that recorded, through the reproduction of motion picture cells, passing impressions from an automobile traveling on the highway. The experience of the highway,

according to the authors, consisted of the perception of roadside detail, the sense of motion and space, the feeling of basic orientation and the apparent meaning of landscape. The sequence of images that approximated a cinematic view described a brief trip on the Northeast Expressway "as it might impress a typical passenger."¹⁴ Appleyard, Lynch and Myer concluded that the speed and movement implicit in contemporary car culture could benefit the "desire to find visual means for pulling together large urban areas."¹⁵

The visual documentation of the existing urban environment was also a perceived characteristic of the Pop Art movement in the United States. In "A Significance for A&P Parking Lots or Learning from Las Vegas," published in the March 1968 issue of *Architectural Forum* (later republished with revisions as the first section of *Learning from Las Vegas*), Venturi and Scott Brown took Pop Art to be an example of a tolerant approach to the "existing landscape." Combining a populist aesthetic with the advances proposed in *The View from the Road*, the article claimed that "[c]reating the new for the artist may mean choosing the old or the existing. Pop artists have relearned this. Our acknowledging existing, commercial architecture at the scale of the highway is within this tradition."¹⁶ Venturi and Scott Brown departed from the one-to-one equivalency of city to mental picture first proposed by Lynch in *The Image of the City*. Rather than

contending, like Lynch, that the city had to be exceptionally organized in ways that were immediately apprehensible, Venturi and Scott Brown suggested that the city, regardless of its apparent organization or disorganization, retained latent patterns that could be discovered and disclosed by the architect-planner.

A year later, Scott Brown published "On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning" in the May 1969 issue of the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*. In Los Angeles, she proposed, the Pop artist found both a subject and a catalyst: the existing city and a means to communicate. She wrote, "[Ed] Ruscha's Thirty Four Parking Lots [1967], photographed from a helicopter, resemble [Allan] D'Arcangelo paintings: arrowed, tensioned, abstract diagrams where oil patterns on the asphalt reveal different stress from differing accessibility."¹⁷ Ruscha, who wanted to report while at the same time to abstain from judgment, created a series of self-published books—*Twenty Six Gasoline*

17 /
Scott Brown, Denise. 1969. "On Pop Art,
Permissiveness, and Planning."
*Journal of the American Institute of
Planners*, 185.

18 /
Scott Brown, "On Pop Art,
Permissiveness, and Planning," 186.

Stations (1963), *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965) and *Every Building on Sunset Strip* (1966) are a few examples—that exposed the surfaces of the living city. Blunt in delivery, Ruscha's books were Okie-Pop-Minimal visions of vacant landscapes. In its random collection of aerial views of empty parking lots, Ruscha's *Thirty Four Parking Lots* documented the commonly unseen. These images made visible what is usually invisible from the ground. For example, Scott Brown reproduced "Good Year Tires, 6610 Laural Canyon, North Hollywood [sic]." (She also reproduced "El Paso, Winslow Arizona" from *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* and "6565 Fountain Avenue" from *Some Los Angeles Apartments*.) The aerial photograph of the Good Year Tires store shows a vast and unpopulated parking lot; it is long and narrow, almost too much so in relation to the proportionately small tire service center that the lot is intended to serve. The relevance of Ruscha's Pop Art images in general were that they furnished Scott Brown with instances of the materializations of the concealed relationship between the building and the parking lot. For her, Ruscha's picture evinced a "pattern in the sprawl."¹⁸

In 1971 Scott Brown contributed “Learning from Pop” to the December issue of *Casabella*, a special issue on “The City as an Artifact.” In her most sustained discussion of the merits of Pop Art, Scott Brown explained that Pop artists celebrated the existing environment—as it is rather than as it should be—and therefore that Pop Art underscored the context in which the architect and planner could learn. Importantly, the “pop landscape”—supermarkets, parking lots, hot-dog stands, corner stores, warehouses, boulevards, driveways, alleys, etc.—could furnish the vital information required for future planning and subsequent building. It was, she wrote, “one of the few contemporary sources of data on the symbolic and communicative aspects of architecture [...]”.¹⁹ Furthermore, Scott Brown recommended the application of new types of analytic techniques that could aggregate into a comprehensible system an abundance of repeated data. Film sequences like those reproduced in *View from the Road*, for example, could combine with conventional techniques such as Nolli type maps, aerial photographs and graphical comparative methods to systematically describe, what Scott Brown perceived as, the ever evolving dimensionality of the existing city.²⁰

Scott Brown’s “Learning from Pop” was one-part of a two-part dialogue with the architectural critic and historian Kenneth Frampton. Appearing in the same issue of *Casabella* and directly following Scott Brown’s article,

¹⁹ /
Scott Brown, Denise. 1971. “Learning
from Pop.” *Casabella*: 16.

²⁰ /
Scott Brown, “Learning from Pop,” 17.

Frampton’s “America 1960-1970: Notes on Urban Images and Theory” questioned the practical value of lessons learned from Pop Art and what he referred to as “Motopia” (i.e., Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Levittown, etc.). As far as Frampton understood, the two were not necessarily related. Unlike Las Vegas, for example, Pop Art exposed the brutality of a world (or, as Scott Brown might say, an existing environment) organized by the marketing principles of Madison Avenue. But, as far as Frampton was concerned, this was by no means a positive attribute. Indeed, as he observed, Ruscha’s photographs were devoid of the kind of human warmth that “the life styles that these deculturated forms no doubt

serve to support.”²¹ Rather than having a sincere affinity for his subject, Ruscha’s images instead typified a “clinical” objectivity that was closer to institutionalized market research than it was to an authentic expression of a culture. (The question of how it was for Frampton that market research itself was not an authentic expression of a culture remained unanswered.) He further connected his criticism of Pop Art to Scott Brown’s regard for new analytic techniques of research. Frampton asserted that a faddish fascination with imaging and imagining – an allusion to Lynch’s influence – constituted a distraction from an actual “institutionalized vandalism” that an interest in the common and the “existing” wrought on culture.

21 /
Frampton, Kenneth. 1971. “America
1960-1970: Noted on Urban Images and
Theory.” *Casabella*: 36.

Frampton proposed that Scott Brown’s populist presumptions were a form of coercion and that her “permissiveness” – her belief that the existing city held latent patterns that counted as empirical evidence of a kind of vernacular intelligence – masked the nascent hegemony of market capitalism under the purview of Madison Avenue.

Perhaps Frampton was correct to have raised his objections to Scott Brown’s tolerant approach to the existing city and to urban planning. In her own defense, however, Scott Brown responded to what she considered to be Frampton’s willful misreading of her article. Among many points of contention, Scott Brown, in her article “Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton,” took the historian-critic to have suggested that “architects be radical about the wrong thing: not about using their skills to serve social innovation, but about revolutionary architecture [...]” Contrary to Frampton’s position, she took “social innovation” to have been implicit in Pop Art. She had this to say in “On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning,” a text that Frampton cited in his critique: “the best thing an architect or urban designer can offer a new society, apart from a good heart, is his own skill, used *for* society, to develop a respectful understanding of its cultural artifacts and a loving strategy for their development to suit the felt needs and way of life of its people. This is a socially responsible activity, it is after all, what [Herbert] Gans and the pop artists are doing.”²² Also, as

Scott Brown understood him, Frampton distorted the Venturi and Scott Brown approach to architecture and urban planning, “by suggesting that we consider objects independently of their relationships. Our point is that architects tend to simplify relationships in the city; that Las Vegas is an object lesson in complex relationships.”²³ Scott Brown’s belief that architects and planners could learn from Las Vegas did not imply the wholesale reconfiguration of a city into a version of Las Vegas. Rather, Scott Brown argued that “learning to like Las Vegas for its body will help us to understand how to be gentle with the body of South Street [in Philadelphia] and hence with the lives of its occupants.”²⁴ The benefits of corporeal experience, according to Scott Brown, like the “body” of Las Vegas, superseded the kind of arm-chair theorizing that she and Venturi took the European modernists to have engaged in, a kind of theorizing about urban spaces that was transplanted to the United States without consideration for the home-spun intricacies of the lived context of its cities.

Scott Brown often implied or, as in the case above, explicitly referred to the body and its pleasures and displeasures. Her references to Op Art’s sensorial effect in

her review of the *Urban Atlas* counts as an example. Also, in “On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning,” she wrote, “The shiver that is engendered by trying to like what one does not like has long been known to be a creative one; it *rocks* the artist from his aesthetic grooves and resensitizes him to the source of his inspiration. [...] Here the jolt comes from the unexpected use of the conventional element in an unconventional way [...].”²⁵ Alluding to both matters of taste and visceral responses to visual images, she described Pop Art as “a new horror-giving energy source [...].”²⁶ And, elsewhere, in response to the critic Allan Temko during the “Urban Renewal in

America, 1950-1970” symposium in June 1971, Scott Brown stated, “There’s something to be learned from

22 /

Scott Brown, “On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning,” 185.

While attending the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1950s, Scott Brown had studied with the sociologist Herbert Gans. See especially Gans, Herbert J. 1967. *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community*. New York: Pantheon Books.

23 /

Scott Brown, Denise. 1971. “Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton.” *Casabella*: 41.

24 /

Scott Brown, “Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton,” 43.

25 /

Scott Brown, “On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning,” 185.

26 /

Scott Brown, “On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning,” 185.

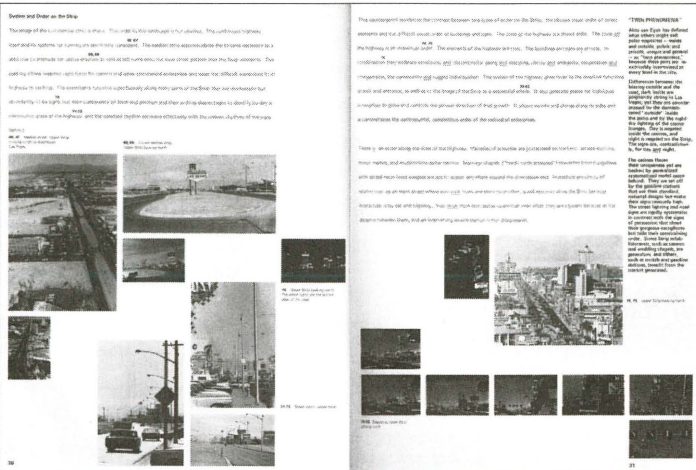


FIGURE 2 | *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), 30-31.

© Robert Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*. MIT Press.

According to Scott Brown, the strip's full-on sensory assault effected a correlative epiphany with orgasmic inflections. Expectant, Scott Brown had visited Las Vegas a year earlier in 1965. On this later occasion, both she and

Venturi were further primed for what they were about to meet on the highway by Tom Wolfe's *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965): "the neon and the par lamps—bubbling, spiraling, rocketing and exploding in sunbursts ten stories high out in the middle of the desert [...]."²⁹ According to Wolfe, the electric stimulations of the strip made its visitors goofy, as did the "childlike megalomania" of gambling and overt sexual-

ity of "the Las Vegas buttocks décolletage."³⁰ Both gambling and sex were (and are) the simultaneously pulsing draw and repellent of Las Vegas. In the glow of desert neon and the low-brow glamour of gambling, Scott Brown and Venturi found beauty in a mean place.

28 /
Quoted in Gilbert, Lynn and Gaylen Moore.
1981. *Particular Passions: Talks with
Women Who Have Shaped Our Times*. New
York: C.N. Potter, 310. See also Aron
Vinegar's essay in this issue.

29 /
Wolfe, Tom. 1965. *The Kandy-Kolored
Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. New
York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 5.

30 /
Wolfe, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake
Streamline Baby*, 5.

II.

How then were Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour to preserve their experiences of Las Vegas, to translate them into a medium appropriate to their task, to learn to like Las Vegas for its body (with all of its accompanying shivers, jolts and horrors), and to understand how to be gentle, loving and respectful with the body of other cities and with the lives of their many inhabitants? Their chosen medium would have to exceed the restrictions of a conventional text with accompanying maps and plans

31 /
On the inherent experiential plight of
street maps, see Treib, Marc. 1980.
"Mapping Experience."
Design Quarterly 115, 8.

32 /
Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour,
Learning from Las Vegas, 15.

33 /
Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour,
Learning from Las Vegas, 15.

that, while conceptually adequate, would generally communicate close to nothing of actual experience.³¹ Conventional architectural plans, flow charts and statistical data arrays were, as the author's claimed, "static where it [the Las Vegas Strip] is dynamic, contained where it is open, two-dimensional where it is three dimensional [...]".³² On its own, a conventional map of Las Vegas

would miss "the iconographical dimensions of experience."³³ Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour instead had to devise a superior way to graphically arrange the world so that it registered with the vivid sensations of a brutally physical and visually complex site like Las Vegas. The city had to be made flesh (to borrow a term from Kevin Lynch) in *Learning from Las Vegas* so that, some thirty years later, a reader's experience of the book would be something like having an experience of the city itself. *Learning from Las Vegas*, like Las Vegas, should mimetically jolt the reader, make her shiver and cause her some horror; it should envision the polymorphous pleasures of the body of Las Vegas so that the reader too might find beauty in a mean place.

III.

Opened to lay flat at 21 x 14 1/8" (10 1/2 x 14 1/8" closed), the topography of *Learning from Las Vegas*'s typographic and graphic layout—the book's body, as it were—implies a subtle dimensionality where gray areas of text recede into the page and black areas of text lay across the page's surface. The main text very often runs

across four columns of a five column grid and is composed of 12 on 16 point Helvetica light that runs rag right (figure 1). The book achieves tonal contrast by utilizing a secondary text that is composed of 12 on 14 point Helvetica medium that runs rag right. The book's axis of symmetry, established by the spine, is transgressed by the asymmetrical composition of each page. For example, the interplay of vertical 12 on 14 point Helvetica medium and horizontal progression of four color photographs mimics the push-pull of Allan D'Arcangelo's *The Trip*, which occupies the lower left corner of the left page. And, the orange-red arrow in D'Arcangelo's picture picks up the orange-red neon "(no) vacancy" sign pictured on the opposing page. Muriel Cooper's use of cross-cutting elements in *Learning from Las Vegas*'s layout effectively demonstrates, for the reader, what the authors describe in their text: "A driver 30 years ago could maintain a sense of orientation in space. At the simple crossroad a little sign with an arrow confirmed what he

already knew. He knew where he was. Today the crossroad is a cloverleaf. To turn left he must turn right, a contradiction poignantly evoked in print by Allan D'Arcangelo."³⁴

Confounding students of "urban perception and imagability," *Learning from Las Vegas*'s format and layout—Cooper's emphasis on "heraldic symbolism," "physiognomic messages," and "locational signs"—gives form to the "noisy" communication system of Las Vegas.³⁵

It should be said that Cooper's design contrivances were not new. Indeed, the supreme modernist aspiration to immediacy through an adroit combination of image and text can be traced to the German typographer and book designer Jan Tschichold's *Die Neue Typographie*—a manifesto-like primer for commercial typographers, first published in 1928. Central to Tschichold's new system was that typography had too long followed out of date traditions; he recommended that typographers, acting like engineers, embrace their age and create a pared-down, dynamic typography that reflected the age of advancing technologies. Tschichold meant to reinvigorate a staid

34 /
Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour,
Learning from Las Vegas, 4. See also
Aron Vinegar's essay in this issue.

35 /
Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour,
Learning from Las Vegas, 4.

profession by compelling the “new” typographer to adopt san-serif typefaces and asymmetrical layouts. Many books on modern architecture pedantically followed Tschichold’s example—as was the case with the *Museum of Modern Art’s What is Modern Architecture?* In this sense, *The View from the Road* also adopts the rigid layout prescribed by Tschichold, but, regardless of its intention to convey movement through the use of film sequences (and certainly exerting some influence on *Learning from Las Vegas*), it is rather static in its delivery.

Cooper’s design of *Learning from Las Vegas* takes up this late modernist tradition by integrating text and image in such a way that as a reader pages through the book she traverses the city of Las Vegas. *Learning from Las Vegas* achieves this through Cooper’s assemblage of Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour’s collection of images, chosen from numerous sources and media, arranged and printed and then bound into a book. Such a

36 /
Tufte, Edward R. 1997. *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative*. Second ed. Cheshire, CT.: Graphic Press, 121.

37 /
Tufte, *Envisioning Information*, 28.

“confection,” or an “assembly of many visual events,” as Edward Tufte would say, enlivens the book’s information by envisioning what the author’s text argues through the presentation of visual comparisons.³⁶ The mixture of images, the density of their compilation into book-form, conveys the complexity appropriate to an understanding of the Las Vegas Strip; but the book itself is not cluttered or confused. Indeed, despite the authors’ displeasure with the results, Cooper’s design follows Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour’s mandate to “find the system behind the flamboyance [...]”

Learning from Las Vegas grants its reader a related view with a sequence of visual comparison charts that correlate individual building components with building types and sites. Distributed throughout the book, these charts are comparable to what Tufte refers to as “small multiples”—a design structure that is repeated for all images.³⁷ For example, the reader can compare casinos like the Sahara to the Riviera from a panorama, from the front, from the side, from parts, from the entrance and from parking. In contrast to Cooper’s visually active page spreads, the charts produced during the Yale seminar are

constants that effectively boil-down data into a coherent picture of Las Vegas. "The aim here," the authors' explain, "is for designers to derive an understanding of this

38 /
Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour,
Learning from Las Vegas, 17.

39
Tufte, *Envisioning Information*, 37-38.

new pattern."³⁸ For the reader, then, a comprehensive pattern of Las Vegas is further enhanced by *Learning from Las Vegas*'s use of small multiples, a graphic system that enhances her visual reasoning. Indeed, *Learning*

from Las Vegas's charts introduce a complementary visual informational structure—through comparison and selection—to the broader thematic complexity of the city of Las Vegas.

The apprehension of the city's patterns stems from perpetual comparisons of data maps: aerial photo of upper strip; undeveloped land; asphalt; autos, buildings, ceremonial space; Nolli's Las Vegas; intensity of communication by building type; commercial use; churches; food stores; wedding chapels; and auto rentals. The authors compiled information that reflected economics, land use, activities on and around the Strip, movement (auto, mass-transit and pedestrian), volume and flow of traffic, and both business and recreation. This information was made manifest in maps of "comparative activity patterns," of "undeveloped land," of "ceremonial space," of "Strip messages" (at two scales) and of "illumination levels on the Strip." Cooper arranged strip message maps and the illumination levels map across a single spread. A large scale "detail" map of the strip with messages cuts across the upper halves of both pages. A smaller scale, though more expansive, map of the same information is directly below. Both message maps are followed by an even smaller scale illumination level map. The movement between scale and detail and between messages and illuminations creates an imagined view of the Strip based on empirical data. While no one experiences Las Vegas from this perspective such an information configuration elicits a series of "micro-readings," whereby the fine texture of the image—a sharpened resolution based on scale differentials—engenders a personalized experience related to everyday perception.³⁹ Here the reader locates areas of activity; a process that is further effected by the aggre-

"TWIN PHENOMENA"

Aldo van Eyck has defined what others might call polar opposites: inside and outside, public and private, unique and general — as "twin phenomena," because these pairs are inextricably intertwined at every level in the city.

Differences between the blazing outside and the cool, dark inside are poignantly strong in Las Vegas: yet they are counter-crossed by the domesticated "outside" inside the patio and by the night-sky lighting of the casino lounge. Day is negated inside the casinos, and night is negated on the Strip. The signs are, contradictorily, for day and night.

The casinos flaunt their uniqueness yet are backed by generalized systematized motel space behind. They are set off by the gasoline stations that use their standard, national designs but make their signs uniquely high. The street lighting and road signs are rigidly systematized in contrast with the signs of persuasion that shout their gorgeous catchwords but have their constraints in order. Some Strip establishments, such as casinos and wedding chapels, are generators, and others, such as motels and gasoline stations, benefit from the market generated.

FIGURE 3 | *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), 31.

© Robert Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*. MIT Press.

gate data displayed in each map and by the manner in which words overlap across the street map to exemplify messages enmeshed in the fabric of the city. Rather than obscuring the Strip with a convoluted method of display, this multi-layered image aids the reader in imagining the complexity of the Strip.⁴⁰

Cooper's design augments *Learning from Las Vegas*' unconventional use of conventional data displays like maps and charts with a dynamic approach to the use of photographs. Aerial photographs are extended by Ed Ruscha-type elevation views of the Strip and *The View from the Road*-type cinematic reproductions. Drawing on lessons learned from *The View from the Road*, Venturi, Scott

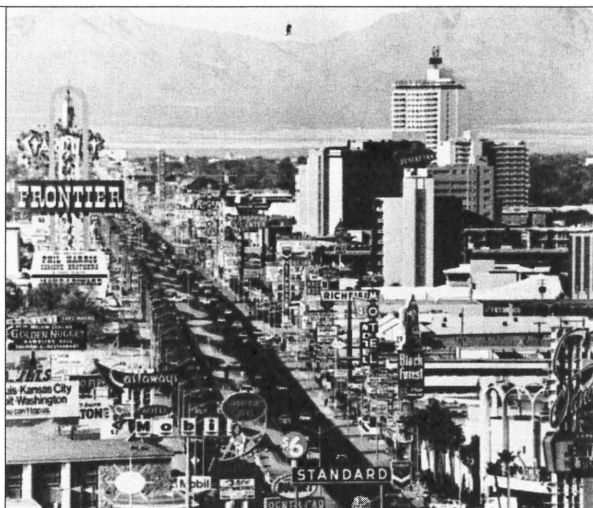


FIGURE 4 | *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), 31 detail.

© Robert Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*. MIT Press.

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The ground rules were set earlier in Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, published in 1965 as the first in a series of the The Museum of Modern Art Papers on Architecture. When Robert Venturi began to write *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* in 1962, Modernism in architecture, as in many things related to art and design, counted as everything. The prevailing position was, according to Venturi, to idealize "the primitive and elementary at the expense of the diverse and the sophisticated."⁴⁰ Knocking Mies van der Rohe's much quoted axiom, Venturi wrote, "The doctrine 'less is more' bemoans complexity and justifies exclusion for expressive purposes." The alternative was, for Venturi, inclusion for expressive purposes. He went on to state that "[...] aesthetic simplicity which is a satisfaction to the mind derives, when valid and profound, from inner complexity." See Venturi, Robert. 1965. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 16-17.

Brown and Izenour were attentive to the Strip and its messages' ability to control flow, direction and speed.⁴¹ Cooper's page layouts accentuate the velocity of flowing information. In these sequences, the camera along with car, move steadily forward. As both camera and car move, a tension builds, growing in direct relation to the reduced cinematic field. The spatial narrative—animated, continuous and flowing—foils the tradition of architectural montage where the sense of the city is created through juxtaposition and intervention.

There is a particular sequence of photographs, however, that produces a close approximation of an experience of the Strip

(figures 2-4). An admixture of color and black and white photographs, varying in size, creates a beguiling overview of Las Vegas. The photographs are not organ-

41 /
Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour,
Learning from Las Vegas, 9.

42 /
Garrison and Daston. "The Image of
Objectivity," 81-82.

ized to convey a singular narrative through approximate movement. Rather, the photographs are ordered in such a way that they showcase the city and its patterns of activities. Swirling through the city from the air

and from on the street, the reader's imagination is activated in kind. For her, size, color and arrangement conspire to display the texture and detail of Las Vegas. The quickened and slowed pace of the composition and the condensed and expanded views of the photographs combine to transfigure *Learning from Las Vegas* into personalized and intimate "micro-readings" analogous to the diversity of everyday perceptions.

The nagging problem of translation, transferal, transformation and the challenges of escaping flatland still remain embedded in *Learning from Las Vegas*. There are moments when Cooper's design of *Learning from Las Vegas* does not quite live up to its program of envisioning Las Vegas. In a general sense, "Part II: Ugly and Ordinary Architecture, or the Decorated Shed" flattens out; and, while the textual content certainly makes its challenging points, this portion of the book lacks the graphic boldness of "Part One." More particularly, there are instances where the authors, as if the gravitational pull of doubt were pulling them towards flatland, resort to loosely drawn arrows to signify (rather than embody) physical changes on the Strip and to direct the reader to significant points. These moments of pointing underscore Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's ambivalence to Cooper's design.

IV.

Like Lynch and the Pop artists, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour wanted to image the city. In one sense, the photographs, film strips, maps, charts and other images that inhabit *Learning from Las Vegas* are on their own thought to be objective, automatic and void of creative media-

tion. In this respect, *Learning from Las Vegas* evokes early modern atlases, which were, as Dalston and Galison remark, “manifestoes for the new brand of scientific objectivity,” or “noninterventionalist” or “mechanical objectivity.”⁴² The idea of mechanical objectivity was antithetical to the subjectivity of the idiosyncratic and intimate, combating the subjectivity inherent to scientific and aesthetic judgments. Indeed, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour intended such an objectivity with their initial notion of *Learning from Las Vegas*’s deadpan use of new technologies to mediate between the city and the experience of the city. Considering the content of *Learning from Las Vegas* and Scott Brown’s early writings, it seems odd that Scott Brown’s notion of permissiveness, her idea that, like Pop Art, the conventional could be handled unconventionally, and her early insights into graphic means to produce synoptic views of urban dynamics were at odds with Cooper’s handling of the design problem inherent to envisioning Las Vegas. In fact, it now would seem reasonable to suggest that for both Scott Brown and for Cooper objectivity was second to the evocative force of subjective judgment. And it is no less reasonable to conclude that Scott Brown’s prescriptive “learning to like” is more in keeping with the kind of training crucial to subjective judgment. Hence, it is Cooper’s design of the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* that engenders in the reader’s imagination by regenerating the heat of perceptual experience. Indeed, a critical component of the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* is how it builds its information density—its full array of data—by letting the reader form her own juxtapositions and mental palimpsests. In Cooper’s hands, *Learning from Las Vegas*’s graphic elegance and its spirited simplicity engage the internal complexity of the mind, thereby exciting aesthetic pleasures. Las Vegas envisioned by *Learning from Las Vegas* through image variety and graphic juxtapositions means transgressing the limits of standardized grids—both in terms of the book and in terms of the city; it means opening a space for enjoyment; it means “trying to like what one does not like”; it means learning.

V.

There is always, however, a learning curve.

Unfortunately, Las Vegas envisioned by *Learning from Las Vegas* only applies to the 1972 edition of the book. In 1977 MIT Press published Scott Brown's redesigned and revised edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*. It is my contention that the revised edition's greatly reduced format, its deletion of many graphic devices, and its pedestrian typographic layout handicapped Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's joint effort to envision the Las Vegas Strip within the pages of *Learning from Las Vegas*. Nevertheless, as debilitating as the alterations to size, image content and layout may have been, the existence of the revised edition underscores the visual potency of the first edition—the manner in which it mobilizes all manner of visual devices to inform its audience. While it is very difficult to measure whether or not all readers experience the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* in similar ways, it is fair to say that an experience of the first edition is distinct from an experience of the revised edition. The latter experience pales in comparison.

The alterations were made, according to "The Preface to the Revised Edition," because students complained about the first edition's price. Originally, the first edition cost twenty-five dollars and the price quickly rose to seventy-five dollars.⁴³ No doubt, the larger format and four-color printing made for an expensive book. Given the authors' pedagogic intentions, it seems prudent that they would make adjustments to lower production costs so as to increase the books distribution amongst students of architecture. After all, a cost prohibitive book was contrary to *Learning*

43 / Denise Scott Brown, telephone interview with author, January 26, 2003.

from Las Vegas's populist intent. Cost, however, was not the only determinate in Scott Brown's redesign. It was also the case that the authors were displeased with Cooper's design, a circumstance that they felt was imposed on them by the publisher. Scott Brown thus reformatted the book to first reduce its cost, thereby making it available to students of architecture and urban planning,

and to secondly give it the scholarly aura that she and her colleagues had originally intended for *Learning from Las Vegas*.

Nevertheless, in an ironic twist, the compromises made in modifying the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* demonstrate the problematics of giving people what they want. By acquiescing to the gripes of architecture students and to the authors' rigid view of how the material first produced in studio should be reproduced, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour effectively foiled their initial goal. On an experiential level, less can be learned from the 1977 edition than can be learned from the 1972 edition. To read from the former is to read from a markedly different book, a book that is far less ambitious in its ability to envision Las Vegas as "an object lesson in complex relationships."

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