INSTRUCTION AND PROVOCATION, OR RELEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS

VISIBLE LANGUAGE 37.3
SPECIAL ISSUE

Michael Golec and Aron Vinegar
Guest Editors

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MICHAEL GOLEC AND ARON VINEGAR

Instruction and Provocation, *or Relearning from Las Vegas*

INTRODUCTION

Since its initial publication in 1972, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* has been recognized as a seminal statement in the history and theory of architecture and hailed as one of the defining texts of postmodernism. As such it played an exemplary role in early theorizations of the postmodern condition by such figures as Jean Francois Lyotard, Charles Jenks, Ihab Habib Hassan and Frederic Jameson, to name a few. But it seemed to us a contradiction, or better, a tautology, to use the book as exemplary of postmodernism when it was one of the texts supposedly inaugurating that "moment." In fact, *Learning from Las Vegas* is fraught with contradictions that often put its own theses under pressure, not to mention the canonical readings and receptions of this text.

In 1973 *Visible Language* published an excerpt from *Learning from Las Vegas*. Now thirty years later, this special issue of the journal brings together five critical essays that challenge *Learning from Las Vegas'* canonical reception and, in doing so, opens up rich possibilities for questioning some of the premises underlying the various agendas for which it has been mobilized. Rather than seeing *Learning from Las Vegas* as delivering a straightforward message of postmodernism—whatever that would be—the essays in this issue attempt to recapture its rich sense of "ambiguity." In order to do so, contributors have often gone back to the text itself.[1] The book is the material support from which the essays begin to explore *Learning from Las Vegas'* internal logic and what it "does," rather than necessarily concentrating on the authors' purported intentions or interpretations generated by subsequent reception. This approach is matched by a careful situation of the book in relation to relevant and productive historical and theoretical constellations.

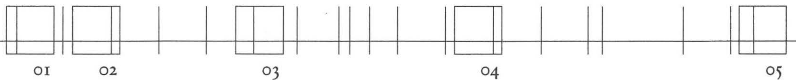
1 / Actually "texts": the 1972 large format edition and the redesigned, small format 1977 edition.

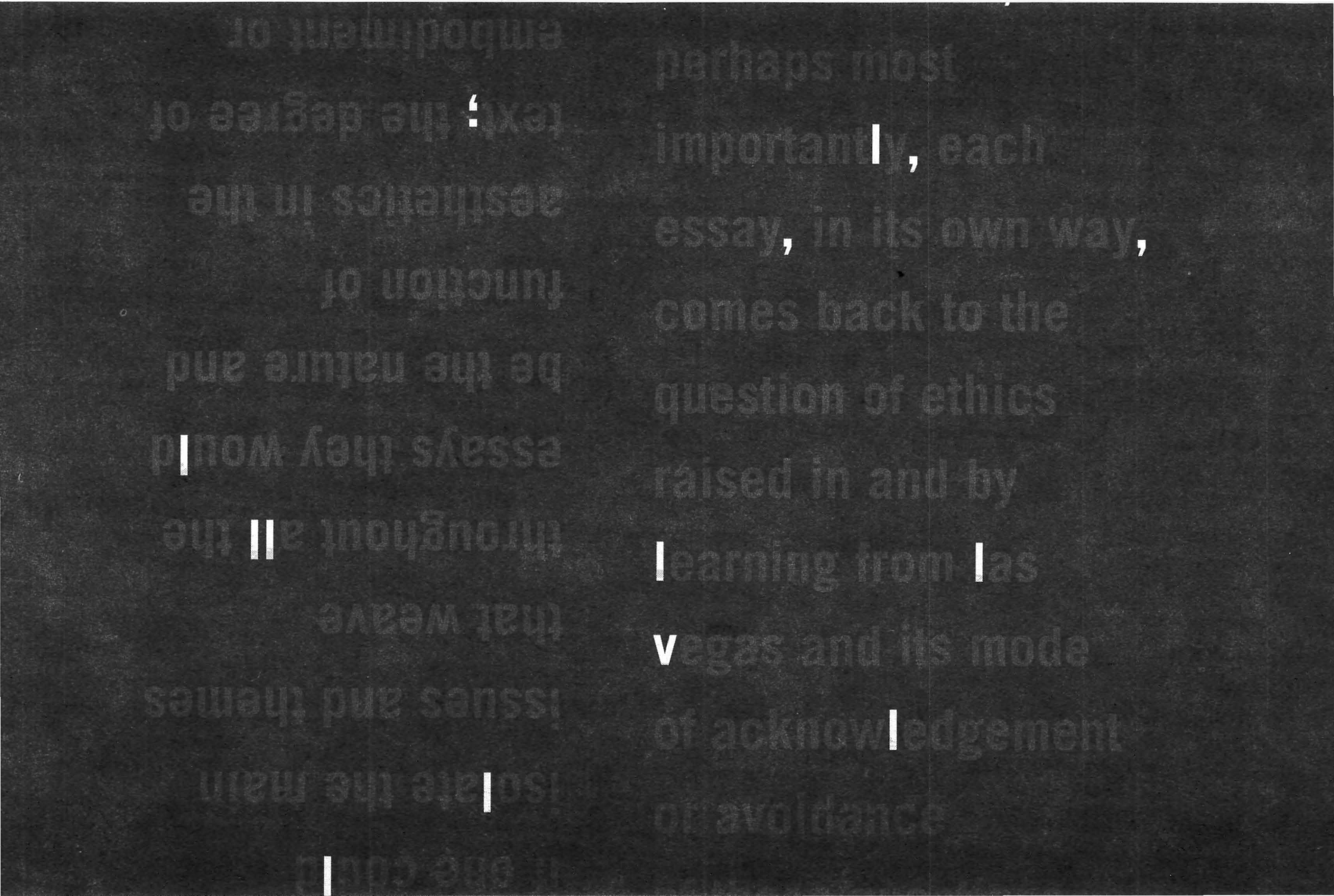
Ritu Bhatt's essay explores the status of symbolic reference (the "routes of reference") and the function of aesthetics in *Learning from Las Vegas* through the lens of the philosopher Nelson Goodman. She questions the reception of the text as cleaving apart its aesthetic dimensions from issues of ethics and cognition. Michael Golec focuses on the materiality and meaning of the book qua book in terms of its graphic design and the kinds of visual strategies and arguments it mobilizes in order to envision the Las Vegas strip. Aron Vinegar's essay argues that *Learning from Las Vegas* demonstrates a full-scale engagement

with the implications of philosophical skepticism thereby questioning its (unethical) characterization as playfully ironic, as an uncritical collusion with the culture industry or as a straightforward equation of architecture with unhindered communication. Nigel Whiteley reads *Learning from Las Vegas* in conjunction with Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* in order to elucidate the shared concerns, and major differences, between them at a crucial period in the theorization of architectural practice. Dell Upton's essay examines the semiotics of *Learning from Las Vegas* and the nature of empathy and embodiment, or lack of it, in its understanding of architectural symbolism.

If one could isolate the main issues and themes that weave throughout all the essays they would be the nature and function of aesthetics in the text; the degree of embodiment or disembodiment in Venturi and Scott Brown's understanding of the relationship between viewer, architecture and text; the nature and mode of architecture's relationship to issues of communication; how word and image interact and function in the book and the strategies they enable, the degree to which *Learning from Las Vegas* initiated a "linguistic turn" in architecture towards theory, text and communication; and perhaps most importantly, each essay, in its own way, comes back to the question of ethics raised in and by *Learning from Las Vegas* and its mode of acknowledgement or avoidance of those questions.

As editors we have not tried to pave over the significant differences between the essays nor their many points of convergence. We like to think of this special issue of *Visible Language* as both an instantiation and prolegomena to a further rethinking of this deservedly important text that merits critical responses equal to the ambitiousness of its claims.

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RITU BHATT

Aesthetic or Anaesthetic: *The Competing Symbols of Las Vegas Strip*

ABSTRACT

Postmodern theorists such as Lyotard, Jencks, Foster and Jameson acknowledge *Learning from Las Vegas* as a seminal text crucial to the development of postmodern aesthetics in architecture. Most commonly, the book is known to have promoted a postmodern laissez-faire approach that embraces historical architectural motifs uncritically. Critics of the book also point to the mindless image making and commercialism that *Learning from Las Vegas* promotes. In this paper, I draw parallels between Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's arguments and Nelson Goodman's theory of symbols in *Languages of Art* (1968) and argue that the postmodern rhetoric associated with the book limits a closer inspection of the book's methodology, the aim of which was to make architecture more communicable and make architects relearn to see.

The book proposed that architecture should reposition itself from its modernist emphasis on space and structure to a postmodern reading of signs and symbols. By reclaiming its symbolic content, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour hoped to turn architecture into a visible language – to make it socially less coercive and aesthetically more vital. More importantly, they claimed that this visibly vital architecture possessed a language that could be analyzed and evaluated. In fact, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's call for "withholding judgment" was to be "used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive." In a similar vein, Nelson Goodman associates the practice of disinterest with aesthetic cognition and argues that aesthetic experiences are not just limited to works of art, but that they can happen any time. The question we should ask is not "what is art?" but "when is art?" In doing so, Goodman shifts the emphasis to understanding aesthetics as a temporal moment/moments when some sort of deep transformation or cognition happens.

This paper analyzes the competing world of signs on the Strip in *Learning from Las Vegas* through a Goodmanian route of reference. It identifies Goodmanian symptoms, such as exemplification, complex and indirect reference, relative repleteness, and syntactic and semantic density. As symbol systems, these features are neither necessary nor sufficient for aesthetic functioning, but they are indications that the item is functioning as work of art.

—*Learning from Las Vegas*, first published in 1972, proposed that architecture should reposition itself from its modernist emphasis on space and structure to a postmodern reading of signs and symbols. This shift would allow architects to relearn to see and as a consequence, make the practice of design socially less coercive and aesthetically more vital. The book introduced suspending judgment as a mechanism to free the imagination and make subsequent judgments more sensitive.[1] This process, it was hoped, would increase the architect's capacity to make discriminations and learn from the everyday. Such an approach to aesthetic cognition that emphasizes learning has parallels with Nelson Goodman's arguments in his *Languages of Art*, first published in 1968, according to which aesthetic experiences distinguish themselves as moments of disinterest, enlightenment and transformation.

1 / Venturi, Robert, Scott Brown, Denise and Izenour, Steven. 1977. *Learning from Las Vegas*, revised edition, Cambridge: MIT Press, 153.

For Goodman, aesthetic experiences are not limited to works of art, but can happen any time. He stresses that the question to ask is not "What is art?" but "When is art?" And when art happens, it is the moment of nonjudgment and disinterest that allows the subject to expand her horizon of viewing and experience the deep transformative potential of aesthetics. Aesthetic experiences are dynamic rather than static. In fact, Goodman argues that pictures are symbols that refer much the same way as words do. The difference lies in the semantic and syntactic structures that different arts employ. Experiencing aesthetics involves an elusive process of making delicate discriminations, discerning subtle rela-

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Visible Language 37.3
Bhatt, 248-265

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tionships, identifying symbol systems and analyzing what these symbolic systems denote and exemplify. Most of all, it involves interpreting works and reorganizing the world in terms of works and works in terms of the world.[2]

2 / Goodman, Nelson. 1976. *Languages of Art: An Approach to A Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 241.

3 / Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 11-13

In *Learning from Las Vegas* Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour introduce the commercial strip as the new landscape of the automobile-driven environment. In this landscape of big signs, small buildings and high speeds, architecture becomes a symbol, or a series of symbolic systems in space competing and often contradicting each other. The entire book, which is a collage of passages, short essays, maps and diagrams, initially conceived as a report of a design studio offered at Yale in 1967, aims to devise systems of thought that would allow architects to analyze the new emerging environment of the Strip. In this new landscape, buildings do not just denote the functions they house, but function as signs conveying multiple meanings.

For instance, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour write:

The big sign leaps to connect the driver to the store... and the graphic sign in space has become the architecture of landscape... It is the highway signs, through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, their particular positions in space, their inflected shapes, and their graphic meanings, that identify and unify the mega texture... Symbol dominates space. Architecture is not enough. Because the spatial relationships are made by symbols more than by forms, architecture in this landscape becomes symbols in space rather than forms in space. Architecture defines very little: The big sign and the little building is the rule of Route 66.[3]

In their book, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour promote an Ugly and Ordinary Architecture (U&O), as an alternative to the heroic modern architecture of pure form. They point out that in U&O architecture, communication happens through denotative meanings, derived from direct, literal references. For instance, the conspicuous sign that identifies the Fire Station just by the simple act of spelling it: FIRE STATION NO. 4., acts both as a symbol as well as an expressive architectural abstraction. Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour argue that such ges-

tures of naming are not merely ordinary, but they represent ordinariness. Furthermore, they point out that other levels of meanings are evoked via association, past experience, conventions and other indirect references. For instance, the Fire Station's function and its civic character is evoked by particular aspects of the building – its decorated false façade, the banality of its standard aluminum sash and roll-up doors, the flagpole located in front and so forth. This manner of identification points to the everyday ways in which aesthetic experiences can be discerned.

Goodman also emphasizes the day-to-day reasoning inherent in experiencing aesthetics and argues that the agent has the capacity to identify various particulars of an experience. In fact, aesthetic experiences in Goodman's work are understood as intentional states of mind in which we bear a responsibility for justification. For instance, judgments like "Louis Kahn's Salk Institute is, metaphorically, a monastic cloister" have the ability to change experience through arguments grounded in particulars. By the time we come to perceive the Salk Institute in this way, we have already deliberated about it. The serenity of the Salk Institute, the repetitive vocabulary of the building, the courtyard with a central channel of water, the concrete frame and teak cubicles, and even, perhaps, the idea of a religious experience in a monastic complex–all contribute to our "reading" of the Institute. These particulars may or may not combine in particular ways for an aesthetic experience to happen. The more important point is this: the possibilities of permutation and combination are infinite, yet they are amenable to some form of articulation and analysis.[4]

4 / For more on the relationship between Goodman's infinite particulars and Aristotelian practical reasoning, see Ritu Bhatt. 2000. "The Significance of the Aesthetic in Postmodern Architectural Theory." *Journal of Architectural Education*, MIT Press, May, 229-238.

What is interesting, however, is the shift in Goodman's thinking about architecture between the publication of his book *Languages of Art* and the essay "How Buildings Mean" in *Domus* in 1986. In *Languages of Art*, architecture poses problems for Goodman because he is unable to reconcile how notations such as plan drawings signify

meanings and how that compares with the different ways by which buildings exemplify multiple meanings. In "How Buildings Mean," published in *Domus* (which was part of a special series commemorating the 45TH anniversary of *Domus*), Goodman's analysis is singularly focused on indirect reference and exemplification. Goodman is invited along with other thinkers and philosophers such as Hans Georg Gadamer, Jacques Derrida and Kenneth Frampton to respond to the predicament faced by architects in assimilating postmodernism and deconstruction.[5] In his introduction to Goodman's piece the editor, Vittorio Magnano Lampugnani, describes Goodman as an original and lively American thinker who stands for a return to a rationalistic discipline. More importantly, Goodman is described as a philosopher who insists that next to truths exist lies, and that in this respect he is a "constructivist" or as he defines himself, a "constructionalist." The editor Lampugnani ends his introduction by pointing out that, "it goes without saying that as such he is the opposite of deconstructionalist Derrida."[6]

In this famous essay on architecture, Goodman cites Robert Venturi's work and focuses his discussion entirely on exemplification and indirect reference. Goodman writes, "when Robert Venturi writes of 'contradiction' in architecture, he is not supposing that a building can actually assert a self-contradictory sentence, but is speaking of exemplification by a building of forms that give rise when juxtaposed, because they are also severally exemplified in architecture of contrasting kinds (for example, classical and baroque), to expectations that contravene each other. The contradiction thus arises from indirect reference."[7] In fact, Goodman argues that the expression of meaning in architecture is seldom denotational—at the level of description or representation. In most cases, buildings express meanings through exemplification. That is, that the building may not represent anything as such, but it may exemplify or express certain

5 / Goodman, Nelson.1986. "Che cosa significa costruire, e quando e perche." *Domus* 672, 17-28.

6 / Vittorio Magnano Lampugnani, in his Introduction to the Goodman article in *Domus* 672. Goodman is known to have respect for the deconstructionists. He saw his own work as a form of deconstructing language for purposes of achieving greater clarity and precision, and the elimination of spurious theories and issues. E-mail communication with Curtis Carter on March 3, 2003.

7 / Goodman, Nelson. "How Buildings Mean." In Goodman, Nelson and Elgin, Catherine. 1988. *Reconceptions in Philosophy.* London: Routledge, 42.

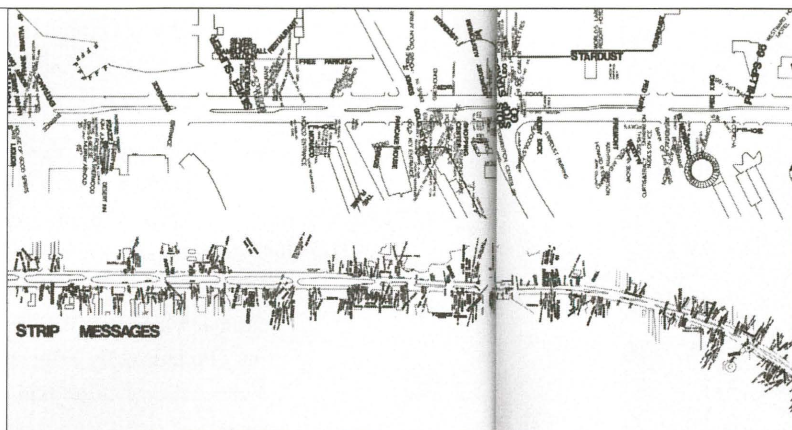

FIGURE 1 | *Strip Messages*

In the diagram "Strip Messages," which displays every written word from the road as seen, the search for the complex ways by which particulars add to meaning in the landscape is evident. The particulars may or may not combine in particular ways for an aesthetic experience to happen. The more important point is this: the possibilities of permutation and combination are infinite, yet they are amenable to some form of articulation and analysis. (Figures 50, 51), pp. 20-21

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properties. Such reference, Goodman argues, runs not as denotation does, from symbol to what it applies to as label, but in the opposite direction, from symbol to certain labels that apply to it or to properties possessed by it.[8] In fact, exemplification is one of the major ways by which architectural works mean; exemplified qualities are not qualities a building merely possesses but are qualities that the building exemplifies. For instance, Goodman gives the example of the Verzehnheiligen pilgrimage church near Bamberg and shows that the qualities of synocopation and dynamism associated with the building depend not upon how different formal properties relate to each other but of the properties the building exemplifies. The emphasis on exemplification is central to Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's analysis, especially in how they demonstrate that, in the architecture of the highway strip, buildings do not inherently mean something.

8 | Goodman, *Reconceptions*, 36.

Instead they combine false fronts that disengage themselves from the building, and reengage in the new world of the highway strip—turning themselves perpendicular to the highway as big signs competing and often contradicting each other. Las Vegas, for them, is an object lesson in complex relationships.

In a similar vein, Goodman emphasizes that works of art are not inert and they do not refer solely (if at all) to themselves. Works of art pick out, point to and refer to some of their properties but not to others. And most of these exemplified properties are also properties of other things, which are thus associated with, and may be indirectly referred to by, the work. Furthermore, Goodman emphasizes the normative dimensions of interpreting both the literal as well as metaphorical aspects of art. Understanding a work of art, Goodman writes, is not to appreciate it, enjoy it or find it beautiful, but to interpret it correctly—and to recognize what and how it symbolizes and how what it symbolizes bears on other aspects of our worlds. Pointing out that metaphorical truth is as distinct as is literal truth from literal falsity, Goodman shows how metaphorical referencing in buildings can also be evaluated. For instance, a Gothic cathedral that soars and sings does not equally droop and grumble. Although both descriptions are literally false, the former, but not the latter is metaphorically true.[9]

9 / Goodman, *Reconceptions*, 40.

Goodman's most important contribution, however, is in the distinctions he draws between symbolic systems in general and those that can be argued to be functioning aesthetically. According to Goodman, the properties that distinguish aesthetic systems are: syntactic and semantic density, repleteness and exemplification. As symbol systems, these features are neither necessary nor sufficient for aesthetic functioning; they are indications that the item is functioning as a work of art.

Syntactic density: A work of art contains an undefined number of symbols. The symbol system that a work belongs to has an indefinite number of symbols, so that between

any two there is a third. There is no claim that all of these symbols occur within a single work. Rather the point is that if there are infinitely fine differences between symbols of the system, it is not clear exactly which symbol belongs to the work.

Syntactic repleteness: Symbols function along relatively many dimensions. That is, relatively many of their features or aspects perform symbolic functions. We cannot say that only ten, or a thousand, symbols are significant in an artwork, and the rest are superfluous. There is no feasible way to quantify the number of aspects a symbol has.

Semantic density: The field of reference of a symbol system is such that between any two reference classes there is a third. All language is semantically dense and therefore paraphrase is impossible; the problem of paraphrase stems from repleteness.

In Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's argument, the Las Vegas Strip emerges as a route of reference in which competing symbol systems—both literal and metaphorical—are open to analysis. They start with a basic analysis and identify that the Strip consists of two distinct visual systems: the obvious visual order of street elements and the difficult visual order of buildings and signs.

10 / Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 20.

They describe the two visual systems in the following passage:

The zone *of* the highway is a shared order, and the zone *off* the highway is an individual order. The elements of the highway are civic; the buildings and the signs are private. In combination they embrace continuity *and* discontinuity, going *and* stopping, clarity *and* ambiguity, cooperation *and* competition, the community *and* rugged individualism. The system of the highway gives order to the sensitive functions of the exit and entrance, as well as to the image of the Strip as a sequential whole. It also generates places for individual enterprises to grow and controls the general direction of that growth. It allows variety and change along its sides and accommodates the contrapuntal, competitive order of the individual enterprises.[10]

Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour are searching for a vocabulary that will allow them to explain the ambiguity and apparent chaos, underneath which lies an order not

obvious to the eye. The analysis of various building types ranging from typical hotel-casino complexes, gasoline stations, motels and service-stations to wedding chapels shows how building typologies connect to add syntactic density in the landscape, and how it is possible to discern and recognize this process of accretion. For instance, they point out that gasoline stations that one sees in Las Vegas are the typical buildings one sees in one's neighborhood and their meaning connects at that level of everyday association. While not the brightest in town, "these less bright typologies" of the gasoline stations galvanize together to form yet another layer of meaning on the Strip.

What is of interest to them is to see how buildings sited for altogether different reasons eventually conform to some discernable conventions along the Strip. Some of these discernable conventions include: perception of the moving eye, differing scales of movement along the highway, competition among the advertisers and the photogenic qualities of the Strip as a whole. Most service stations, motels and other simpler types of buildings conform to a general system of inflection toward the highway through position and form of their elements. The scales of movement and the spaces of the highway relate to distances between buildings, which are sited in a way so that they can be comprehended at high speeds. For instance, the side elevations are emphasized because they are seen by approaching traffic from a greater distance, and for a longer time than the front façade. The parking spaces also function as signs. The front parking of a typical hotel-casino complex is meant to be a token. It reassures the customer of the prestige of the complex and negotiates its presence in a way so as not to obscure the building. The real parking space is located along the sides of the complex, allowing direct access while staying visible from the highway. Through all these gestures, it becomes evident that meaning in landscape is communicated through signs and the actual distance between two points is immaterial.

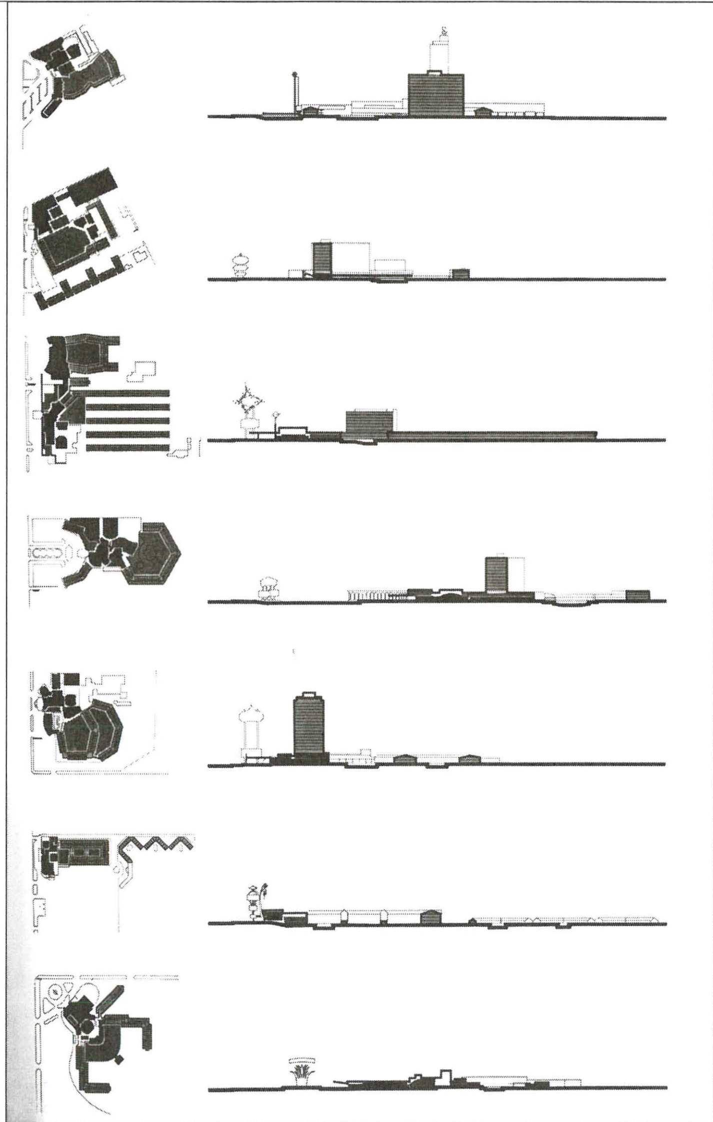

FIGURE 2 | *A Schedule of Las Vegas Strip Hotels: Plans, Sections, Elevations*

The analysis of various building types ranging from typical hotel-casino complexes, gasoline stations, motels and service-stations to wedding chapels shows how building typologies connect to add syntactic density in the landscape, and how it is possible to discern and recognize this process of accretion. In such analyses, it is evident that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour are searching for a vocabulary that will allow them to explain the ambiguity and apparent chaos, underneath which lies an order not obvious to the eye. (Figures 90, 91), p. 37.

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It is important to note that each new element adds not only to the syntactic density of the visual system, but also to its semantic density. Buildings on the Strip operate as signs—referring to the world of the highway strip—constructively exemplifying its properties of transience, superficiality, illusion, glitter and so on. The obsolescence of signs depends less on factors such as physical disintegration, and more on their location along the Strip, largely determined by the leasing system. The signs and casino facades are most changeable in the most unique and monumental parts of the Strip. Their rate of obsolescence depends more on how well they compete while being viewed from the moving automobile on the highway than how they relate to the building which they are part of. Furthermore, in Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's reading, a billboard/neon sign acquires repleteness through its particulars—the particular style of fonts used, neon lights, size, location, construction and innumerable qualities. All contribute to the glitter and transience and to its repleteness, which resists any form of paraphrase.

11 /
Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 73.

12 /
Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 132.

In their search for the various symbol systems, the particulars that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour identify are so many and so indistinguishable that it is impossible to distinguish and delineate smaller symbol systems and how they combine in various ways to transform the Strip in itself into a symbol. In their analysis, such a predicament about paraphrasing is evident.

On the Strip three message systems exist: the heraldic: which include all the signs that dominate the landscape; the physiognomic: the messages given by the faces of the buildings, for instance, the continuous balconies and regularly spaced picture windows of the Dunes saying "HOTEL" and the suburban bungalows converted to chapels by the addition of a steeple; and the locational – service stations are found on corner lots, the casino is in front of the hotel, and the ceremonial valet parking is in front of the casino. All three message systems are closely related on the strip, sometimes they are combined, as when the facade of a casino becomes one big sign or the shape of the building reflects its name, and the sign, in turn reflects the shape. Is the sign the building or building the sign?[11]

Within the discipline of architecture Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour see their work to be consistent with emerging areas of inquiry, such as the search for underlying typologies and the larger search for meaning in architecture. They acknowledge the works of Charles Jencks, George Baird and Alan Colquhoun as important influences, particularly, the essays they wrote in *Meaning in Architecture*, published in1969. E.H. Gombrich's book, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, is also cited by Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour as an important influence. Gombrich's thesis, that physiognomic forms are ambiguous, and they can only be interpreted within a particular cultural ambience is consistent with Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's belief that the symbols on the Strip conform to a conventional system of meanings—meanings that are not inherent in the forms themselves.[12]

However, what is of special interest to them is Colquhoun's interest in the typology of forms and how historical associations from the past become available to a designer's vocabulary. They write:

Alan Colquhoun has written of architecture as part of a "system of communications within society" and describes the anthropological and psychological basis for the use of a typology of forms in design, suggesting that not only are we not "free from the forms of the past, and the availability of these forms, and from the availability of these forms as typological models, but that, if we assume we are free, we have lost control over a very active sector of our imagination and of our power to communicate with others."[13]

Their primary aim is to rejuvenate this aspect of imaginative thought made dormant by modernist emphasis on functional aesthetics, and to devise a methodology that would allow architects to analyze and evaluate the visibly vital architecture of the Strip. They want to remind architects that "architecture that depends on association in its perception also depends on association in its creation."[14] They argue that symbolism is essential to architecture and models from a previous time, or from existing cities, are source materials, and, most importantly, replication is part of

13 / Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 131. It is important to note that in his 1967 review of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architectural Design*, Alan Colquhoun criticized Robert Venturi for failing to demonstrate the necessity for employing the formal structures adapted from past buildings. He was also critical of Venturi's Vanna Venturi House, which he said was a "learned game" in which "the self-circular semantic elements such as the string-courses and semi-circular windows" were composed in an "arbitrary grammar." Alan Colquhoun. 1967. "Robert Venturi," *Architectural Design XXXVII* (August), 362.

14 / Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 129.

the design process. For instance, they write that when designing a window, you start not only with the abstract function of modulating light rays and breezes to serve interior space but with the image of window – of all the windows you know plus others you find out about. This approach, they argue, is symbolically and functionally conventional, but it promotes architecture of meaning, which is broader and richer.

It is the unresolved ambiguity between a belief in underlying architectural typologies and associations that are constant (that repeat themselves from the past) and the Goodmanian search for the Strip's dynamic aesthetic that is open to infinite interpretations that weakens the book's potential to provide a cohesive vision.

Moreover, what is presented in the book are a loose array of photographs, diagrams and notes on the Casino strip meant to evoke the lived experience of the Strip. The techniques of representation are varied and experimental, and it is evident that there is a search for an analytical framework that will do justice to the new emerging environment. Charts offer photographs of all sides of the main casinos and gasoline stations and 93 frames of movie sequence capture movement. Other techniques such as miscellaneous reprints of tourist brochures are also experimented within the book along with a variety of maps. All of these techniques are meant to challenge traditional two-dimensional modes of representation. However, despite the experimental edge of the whole project, a belief in abstraction is evident throughout the text and through the analytical diagrams. For instance, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour argue that it is a study of method and not content, claiming that the analysis of a drive-in church would match that of a drive-in restaurant. In fact, they believe that analysis of one architectural variable in isolation from the others is a respectable scientific and humanistic activity, so long as it is re-synthesized in design. Most of all, they clarify that they are approaching the problem of symbolism in architecture, from a practitioner's point of view, pragmatically, using concrete examples, rather than abstractly through the science of semiotic or through *a priori* theorizing.

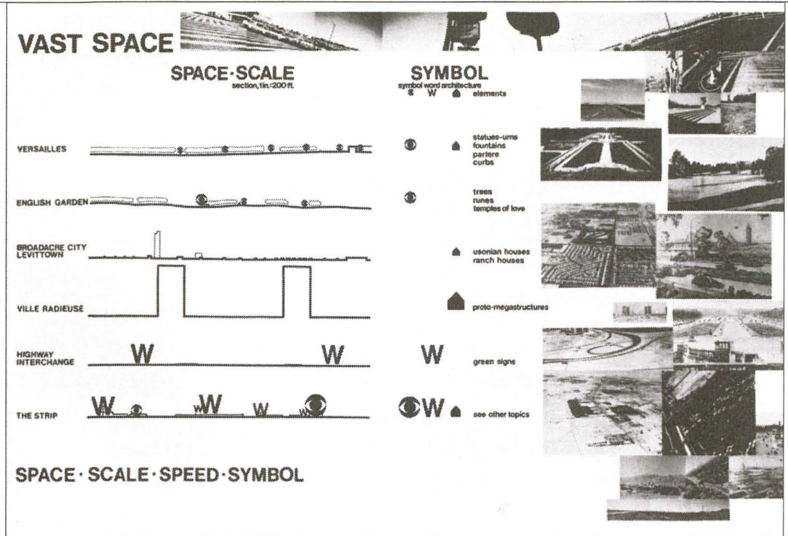

FIGURE 3 | *A Comparative Analysis of Vast Spaces*

Here the A& P parking lot is presented as a logical outcome in the evolution of vast spaces since the Versailles. The diagram compares various typologies. The various street symbols, architectural elements and space/sign ratios are diagrammatically and chronologically mapped. (Figure 24), p. 10. © Robert Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*. MIT Press.

Furthermore, while the book makes a cogent argument for how past associations contribute to design, the methodology proposed in the book starts to come apart when one looks for interpretations for the study of history or for the practice of design. For instance, in one of the diagrams, the A& P parking lot is presented as a logical outcome in the evolution of vast spaces since Versailles. The diagram compares various typologies that include Versailles, the English Garden, Broadacre City Levittown, Highway Interchange and The Strip. The various street symbols, architectural elements and space/sign ratios are diagrammatically and chronologically mapped. In this comparison through history, in which one sees certain patterns disappear and others appear, a linear evolutionary paradigm is reinforced, and the architecture of small buildings and big signs emerges

as a natural consequence of evolution through history. On the other hand, the analogies drawn are completely ahistorical, for example, A&P parking lot is described as the parterre of the asphalt landscape, and grids of lamp-posts are likened to obelisks.[15] It is in such analyses the book starts to loose its potential for providing a historical vision or methodological rigor.

Such frustration with the book's methodology is apparent in most reviews published at the time. While acknowledging the momentary brilliance of Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's argument, most reviewers also criticize it for failing to provide a convincing methodology. Fred Koetter's review represents one such critique:

> After the fun, after the euphoria, after the diagrams and predictable points have been made, is the architect really serving society by the endorsement of such easy overtures to instant gratification? To be sure, the idea of strip development might certainly provide, by way of optimism, nimble abstraction and a variety of useful "models" for the general "structuring" of an automobile-driven urban pattern; but, at a certain point, the limits of the reference must be ascertained and the question must arise: can the literal extension of the it's-not-so-bad-if-you-look-at-it-right syndrome really transform obvious trash into a model for meaningful environment? But assuming momentarily a condition of semi-analytical detachment, what about the formal lessons of Las Vegas and its abstract lessons in "architectural communications"?...What is the architect to do with all that vitality? Is he to simulate it? Is he to run it through his analytical sieve and learn to produce less than fully animated caricatures of it? May he, in traditional way, use it to represent a version of "popular" vitality, to insinuate a recognition of front-line reality?[16]

On the other hand, contemporary theorists, particularly Jean Francois Lyotard, Charles Jencks, Hal Foster, Frederic Jameson, have all focused on the book's postmodern laissez-faire approach and rhetoric. More recently, Neil Leach in his *Anaesthetics of Architecture* has criticized it for desemanticizing and aestheticizing architectural forms. Leach writes, "Yet it is in the abstract handling of form, and their refusal to engage the context of Las Vegas, that the real problems of the book emerge. In decontextualizing the forms

15 /
Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas,* 13.

16 /
Fred Koetter. 1974. "On Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas.*" *Oppositions* 3, May,100-101.

of Las Vegas, they desemanticize them, setting up a pattern that is to haunt them, as we shall see, in their built-work.... It is this principle of aestheticization, then, that allows Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour to remain so oblivious to the sociopolitical questions at the heart of Las Vegas, to anaesthetisize it, and to adapt an approach that is epitomized by their celebration of the advertising hoarding."[17]

In such critiques lies the predicament of the postmodern moment. Can *Learning from Las Vegas* be seen to be promoting anaestheticized advertising or can it be seen as functioning aesthetically as a transformative moment? Are there ways in which one can distinguish between when aesthetic can be said to be functioning cognitively, and when it can be said to be functioning anaesthetically—when images become insular? It is true that *Learning from Las Vegas* lacks a convincing normative framework or a broad vision. Its emphasis on creating an aesthetic awareness is intertwined with broadening social sensibility; yet the studio doesn't necessarily address the particular socio-cultural economics of its setting.[18] And then there are places in the book where image making is uncritically embraced.[19] Yet *Learning from Las Vegas'* brilliant polemic, which allows one to read the Strip as a system/systems of symbols, can be argued to be a transformative moment when one relearns to see. Venturi and Scott Brown's call to withhold judgment does allow architects to recognize an aesthetic in the placement of neon lights, in the arrangement of parking lots, in the gasoline stations and so forth. The aesthetic does not lie in the imagery of built forms, but in the recognition of the inflexion of buildings and billboards, in the recognition of the manner in which different typologies add density to the landscape and in reading the repleteness of the various symbol systems. Such an aesthetic has

17 / Neil Leach, *The AnAesthetics of Architecture*, 63.

18 / Denise Scott Brown, in two articles "Leading from the Rear:" Reply to Martin Pawley, and "Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton," argues that their approach has a strong social basis. Her concern was that architects working in a commercial society needed to be grounded in the "reality" of lower-middle-class American aesthetic values. Close study of the existing landscape might offer "formal vocabularies for today which are more relevant to people's diverse needs and more tolerant of the untidiness of urban life than the "rationalist," Cartesian formal orders of latter-day Modern Architecture." Denise Scott Brown, "Leading from the Rear:" Reply to Martin Pawley (1971), in Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. 1984. *A View from the Campidoglio: Selected Essays, 1953-1984*. (Edited by Peter Arnell, Ted Bickford, and Catherine Bergart.) New York: Harper & Row, 27.

In "Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton," Scott Brown defends herself, "Ken must pardon us for believing that learning to like Las Vegas for its body will help us to understand how to be gentle with the body of the South Street and hence with the lives of its occupants. From its soul too we can learn—or, to put this in the jargon Frampton prefers: from its psycho-socio-politico-economic structure we may derive analytic insights into the form-content interface variables which parameterize its temporal conjoints." At another place in the article she writes, "We use these other traditions, as others have before us, for an artistic reason; but for a social reason as well...There is social need for architectural high art to learn from and relate to folk and pop traditions if it is to serve its real clients and do no further harm in the city." Denise Scott Brown, "Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton," 36-37.

the potential to constantly transform; it is difficult to paraphrase. If it is possible to discern moments when aesthetic functions cognitively and when not, then it can be argued that the polemic of *Learning from Las Vegas* functions most successfully in increasing our capacity to make discriminations and learn from the everyday. More importantly, as Scott Brown claims in re-learning to accommodate the familiar, *Learning from Las Vegas* opens up our social sensibilities as well.[20]

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Aron Vinegar and Michael Golec for their insightful comments on this paper.

19 /
When criticized for image making, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour defend themselves, they write, "please do not criticize us for primarily analyzing image: We are doing so simply because image is pertinent to our argument, not because we wish to deny an interest in or the importance of process, program and structure or, indeed social issues in architecture or in these two buildings. Along with most architects, we probably spend 90 percent of our design time on these other important subjects and less than 10 percent on the questions we are addressing here: they are merely not the direct subject of this inquiry." *Learning from Las Vegas*, 90-91. In "Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton," Denise Scott Brown defends LfLV again, "The separation for closer study of one variable (Las Vegas's physical form) does not imply irresponsibility to the others; it is approved scientific and humanistic behavior. Frampton should criticize if the pieces are not resynthesized in design." Her defense, however, contradicts LfLV's argument about a broader aesthetic, which contests separation of variables as a legitimate methodology.

20 /
"Our social agenda was different from the modernists. We were not promoting an explicit social agenda, but the social concerns of our project were implicit. In fact we were making the argument that in opening aesthetic sensibilities one's social concerns shift as well." Denise Scott Brown, interview with author, February 2003. See endnote 18 as well.

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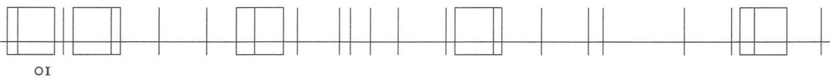
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MICHAEL GOLEC

"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. 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.

1 / 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.

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.

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.

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]

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

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 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.

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.* Chesire, CT: Graphic Press, 2.

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."[7] 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–

7 / 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 *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]

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.

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 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]

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.

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, 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

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

20 / Scott Brown, "Learning from Pop," 17.

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. 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.

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

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 1 | *Learning from Las Vegas (1972), 4-5.*

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

Las Vegas and from Levittown, and there's something to be learned from Chartres we are not giving the people of South Street, Las Vegas or Chartres. Both are manipulative situations in a social sense, both are physical situations from which an architect can learn a great deal."[27]

The body and its vicissitudes, the physiology of perceptual experience, and the physicality of the city informed the production of *Learning from Las Vegas*. This was largely Scott Brown's doing, as demonstrated in her articles and reviews, and was compatible with her and Venturi's initial encounter with the Las Vegas Strip. Scott Brown and Venturi, in 1966, drove a rental car across the arid Nevada sands and entered the neon city—US Route 91, Las Vegas. "Dazed by the desert sun and dazzled by the signs, both loving and hating what we saw, we [Scott Brown and Venturi] were both jolted clear out of our aesthetic skins."[28] Indeed, sun and signs combined and created a shared state of mutual pleasure and displeasure.

27 / Quoted in Canty, Donald. 1971. Urban Renewal in America, 1950-1970: A Symposium. *Design Quarterly* 85, 26. Much like Frampton, Temko was especially derisive in his view of a kind of sentimentality and a conspicuous lack of sincerity in a knee-jerk-bleeding-heart-liberalism that was assumed to give the "people" what they want.

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 sexuality 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 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.

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.

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]

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.

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

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 "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 [...]."

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

37 /
Tufte, *Envisioning Information*, 28.

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 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.

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

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

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-

This counterpoint reinforces the contrast between two types of order on the Strip: the obvious visual order of street elements and the difficult visual order of buildings and signs. The zone of the highway is a shared order. The zone off the highway is an individual order. The elements of the highway are civic. The buildings and signs are private. In combination they embrace continuity and discontinuity, going and stopping, clarity and ambiguity, cooperation and competition, the community and rugged individualism. The system of the highway gives order to the sensitive functions of exit and entrance, as well as to the image of the Strip as a sequential whole. It also generates places for individual enterprises to grow and controls the general direction of that growth. It allows variety and change along its sides and accommodates the contrapuntal, competitive order of the individual enterprises.

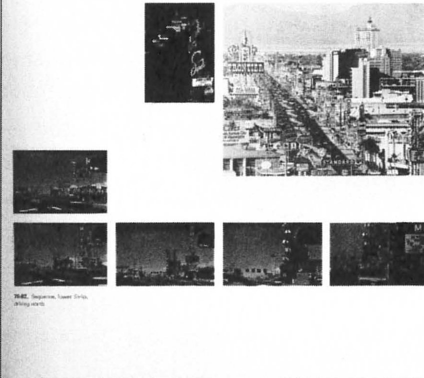
There is an order along the sides of the highway. Varieties of activities are juxtaposed on the Strip: service stations, minor motels, and multimillion-dollar casinos. Marriage chapels ("credit cards accepted") converted from bungalows with added neon-lined steeples are apt to appear anywhere toward the downtown end. Immediate proximity of related uses, as on main street where you walk from one store to another, is not required along the Strip because interaction is by car and highway. You drive from one casino to another even when they are adjacent because of the distance between them, and an intervening service station is not disagreeable.

"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 countercrossed by the domesticated "outside" inside the patio and by the night-sky lighting of the casino lounges. 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 systematic in contrast with the signs of persuasion that shout their gorgeous cacophony but hide their constraining 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.



31

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

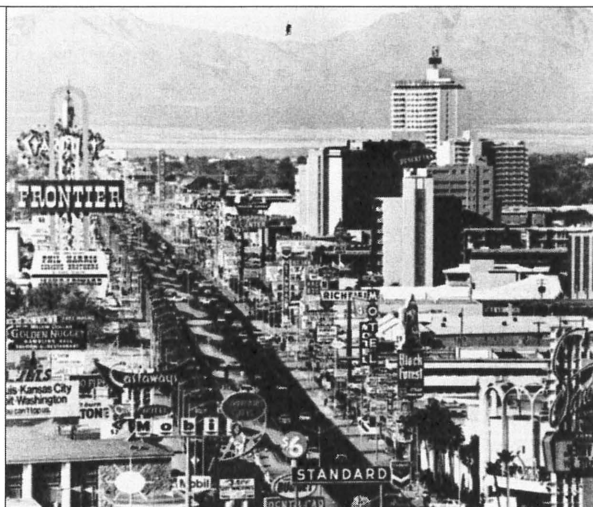


FIGURE 4 | *Learning from Las Vegas (1972), 31 detail.*

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

40 / 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."" 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 organized 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.

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

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

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 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,

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

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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ARON VINEGAR

Skepticism and the Ordinary
From Burnt Norton To Las Vegas

ABSTRACT The premise of this article is that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* exemplifies a full-scale engagement with the implications of philosophical skepticism. Drawing on the philosopher Stanley Cavell's work on skepticism and the ordinary, I take up the classical questions of skepticism and bring them to bear directly on questions of language and architecture in that text. I argue that instead of light irony, complicity with the "culture industry," or the simple equation of architecture with communication, *Learning from Las Vegas* is fundamentally about the "intolerable wrestle with words and meanings" in the city.

Words strain, crack and sometimes break, under the burden, under the tension, slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, will not stay still. Shrieking voices scolding, mocking, or merely chattering, always assail them. The Word in the desert is most attacked by voices of temptation.

T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," *The Four Quartets*

Challenging texts such as *Learning from Las Vegas* do not make reading easy. They are "difficult" to put it in Eliotian terms and are deceptive, as if calling forth a weak skepticism in response to their robust version. In fact, much of the criticism and commentary on *Learning from Las Vegas* from its initial publication in 1972 has circled around the question of skepticism without directly addressing its philosophical premises. At its furthest extreme skepticism manifests itself in nihilism: the radical denial of shared meaning altogether; the other extreme—to live without skepticism—would be to fall in love with the world.[1] Some critics took Venturi and Scott Brown's evaluation of the Las Vegas Strip as "almost all right," to mean simply *all* right. Other cultural critics, mostly from the perspectives of critical and postmodern theory,

1 / Cavell, Stanley. 1991. *The Claim of Reason*. New York: Oxford University Press, 431 and 452.

would implicitly identify them with their full-blown nihilistic interpretations of America, Las Vegas and the "culture industry." In between the two extremes, they were most often branded as liberal ironists embracing a witty, but ultimately innocuous and possibly reckless, cultural pessimism.[2] But I have a hunch that what made the book so infuriating is that it had more of the flavor of courting the extremes without occupying them or the middle ground. This state of affairs is best captured in the graffiti that the "pop-artist" Ed Ruscha saw scrawled in the ruins of an abandoned hotel structure near Glassell Park in Los Angeles: "FUCK THE WORLD... AND FUCK YOU IF YOU DON'T LOVE IT."[3] I take this as a more prosaic formulation of the real stakes of skepticism as outlined by Stanley Cavell: that there are endless specific succumbings to the conditions of skepticism and endless specific recoveries from it, and between the temptations of excessive despair and false hope is a quest for the ordinary and its perspicuousness.

2 / The ironic/Ionic column in the Allen Memorial Museum, Oberlin College, is the exemplary image of their supposedly "playful" skepticism. Of course my parsing out of these three positions is a gross simplification of a range of critical responses that often overlapped.

3 / 1993. "A Conversation... Walter Hopps and Edward Ruscha." Ruscha, Edwards. *Romance With Liquids: Paintings 1966-1969.* New York: Rizzoli, 106. I am sure that many critics would rather use the word stupefaction rather than wonder to characterize their experience. In a sense this would not be incorrect, but as long as it acknowledged that stupefaction is *internal* to the experience of wonder. See Ronell, Avital. 2002. *Stupidity.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 111.

4 / Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 451, "Over and over, an apparent symmetry or asymmetry between skepticism with respect to the external world and skepticism with respect to other minds has collapsed, on further reflection, into its opposite."

Simply stated, the *premise* of this essay is that the visual and textual arguments in *Learning from Las Vegas* exemplify a full-scale engagement with the implications of philosophical skepticism. I am by no means claiming that Venturi and Scott Brown "intended" to exemplify skepticism when they wrote *Learning from Las Vegas*, merely that the resultant book does so. I take my basic orientation from the two fundamental aspects of the threat of skepticism: the uncertainty of knowing the world out there and knowing other minds. These aspects of skepticism are not mutually exclusive—far from it. So-called other minds and external world skepticism often allegorize their respective commitments.[4] Further, I take it that the approach to words in *Learning from Las Vegas* is allegorical of both external world and other minds skepticism. "As if," as Cavell has put it, "to write toward self-knowledge is to

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war with words, to battle for the very weapons with which you fight."[5] A position also echoed in T.S. Eliot's lines from the *Four Quartets* that ends the first part of *Learning from Las Vegas*: "That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory: A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion, leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings. The poetry does not matter..."[6] Thus my core argument in this essay is as follows: In *Learning from Las Vegas* Venturi and Scott Brown explore the fact that we are constantly stumbling over our words, our visible language, in the face of imagining its ability to "word the world" and communicate with others.

Wonder, Disorientation, and Turning Things Around

Stanley Cavell, echoing Plato in his *Theaetetus*, has suggested that philosophy begins in wonder: "...it is philosophy's power to cause wonder, or to stun—to take one aside—that decides who is to become a philosopher."[7] The English word wonder captures the connotations of both the pleasure of amazement and intellectual curiosity. These "wonderful" experiences are not merely one among many, but a kind of rebirth that can initiate a life-long love and labor. For example, Cavell talks about his own ecstatic experience learning to hear the near perfect pitch of music with Ernest Bloch at Berkeley before the "revelatory effect" of studying with the ordinary language philosopher J.L. Austin at Harvard in 1955.[8] Most interesting projects, not just philosophical ones, start in wonder. The art historian Michael Fried writes of being "knocked on his heels" by his first encounter with Anthony Caro's sculpture.[9] Fried's experience captures another important dimension of wonder: the condition of being literally thrown off balance; a state of disorientation and "not knowing" that precedes the "a-ha" moment marking the fall into orientation, meaning and "learning from." If bodily orientation is the phenomenological basis of meaning as such—think of being firm, upright, lowly, base, etc.,—then one

5 / Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 352.

6 / Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. 1972. *Learning from Las Vegas*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 60. The passage is from the "East Coker" section of the Four Quartets. See Eliot, T.S. 1944. *Four Quartets*. London: Faber and Faber, 17.

7 / Cavell, Stanley. 1994. *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 63.

8 / Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 48-51, 55, 59.

9 / Fried, Michael. 1998. "An Introduction to my Art Criticism." *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 27-28.

must entertain the possibility that philosophical problems might also begin with disorientation. In the words of Wittgenstein: "A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about."[10] Or as Cavell has glossed this passage: "...one can take the idea of not knowing one's way about, of being lost, as the form specifically of the *beginning* or *appearance* of a philosophical problem."[11]

One can't help wondering if Venturi and Scott Brown weren't "knocked on their heels" (or tipped over in their car) during their first visit to Las Vegas together in 1966. In fact, this is exactly the kind of event that Denise Scott Brown recounted in an interview: "We rode around from casino to casino, dazed by the desert sun and dazzled by the signs, both loving and hating what we saw, we were jolted clear out of our aesthetic skins."[12] This is an extraordinarily rich passage with its connotations of wonder, disorientation, and (dis)embodied aesthetic experience. In haste, critics often overlooked the *ambivalence* in this passage that, in the strict Freudian sense of the term, is defined as the simultaneous existence of both love and hate towards the same object. In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* Venturi had characterized this kind of relationship as "both-and" rather than "either-or," and in *Learning from Las Vegas* it was termed "twin phenomenon" to suggest that what are considered polar opposites are really "inextricably intertwined at every level in the city."[13] To my mind, there is a focused attempt in *Learning from Las Vegas* to delay the fall into orientation and meaning by extending this condition of ambivalence and disorientation (they often call it "withholding or deferring judgment"). As Denise Scott Brown affirmed in an article published in 1976: "We recommended learning (note, *learning*, not loving–at most we recommend a hate-love relationship) from Las Vegas..."[14] Despite the italicized word learning, I think the key word

10 /
Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1976. *Philosophical Investigations.* G.E.M. Anscombe, translator. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, §123.

11 /
Cavell, Stanley. 1989. "Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture," *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein.* Albuquerque, New Mexico: Living Batch Press, 36.

12 /
Quoted in Brownlee, David. 2001. "Form and Content." In Brownlee, David B., David G. De Long, and Kathryn B. Hiesinger. *Out of the Ordinary.* Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 37. Venturi's first visit to Rome was another transformative moment.

13 /
Venturi, Robert. 1966. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 23. Venturi borrowed this phraseology from the literary critic Cleanth Brook's comments on the writings of John Donne; Venturi et. al. *Learning from Las Vegas,* 31. The phrase "twin phenomena" is borrowed from Aldo van Eyck. My take on these passages differs significantly from what Charles Jencks has called postmodern "double coding." It should be noted that there is a close connection between wonder and mixed entities.

14 /
Scott Brown, Denise. 1976. "On Architectural Formalism and Social Concern: A Discourse for Social Planners and Radical Chic Architects." *Oppositions 5,* 103.

here is "from" as in *Learning* from *Las Vegas*. It functions much like the word abandonment, with its connotations of both leaving and ecstasy; as if both were required, and not just once, in order to embrace learning as a twisting away from, and within, the ordinary. One might say we are abandoned *to* the ordinary.[15] To return to Wittgenstein's quote, we are seriously mistaken if we assume that disorientation is *solved* or brought to an *end* by finding the "right" way back. Right? Forward? Back? Which way? Disorientation is a condition to be undone, not solved.

15 / Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 47. Also see Cavell, Stanley. 1995. "What Did Derrida Want of Austin?" *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 64, "I read Austin not as denying that I have to abandon my words, to create so many orphans, but as affirming that I am abandoned to them, as to thieves, or conspirators..." Here I am providing a paltry account of this word in Cavell's lexicon which also encompasses connotations of enthusiasm, "forgetting ourselves," leaving, relief, quitting, release, shunning, allowing, deliverance, trusting and suffering. Cavell, Stanley. 1980. *The Senses of Walden*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 136.

In an early essay, significantly entitled "The Meaningful City," Scott Brown diagnosed this condition of modern disorientation as urban *agnosia*: a condition "in which the individual perceives with his senses but cannot give meaning to what he perceives."[16] Venturi and Scott Brown tackle this problematic in the opening pages of *Learning from Las Vegas* in their account of the disorientation experienced in the everyday car culture of the highway in post-war America:

16 / Scott Brown, Denise. 1965. "The Meaningful City." *AIA Journal*, 29. I believe Kevin Lynch was also talking about something similar in his concept of "direction ambiguity" in relation to problems with the city's imageability.

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 the print by Allan D'Arcangelo. But the driver has not time to ponder paradoxical subtleties within a dangerous, sinuous maze. He relies on signs to guide him – enormous signs in vast spaces at high speeds.[17]

D'Arcangelo's *The Trip* was "figure 1" in the article "A Significance for A&P Parking Lots Or Learning From Las Vegas" (1968), the precursor to the first part of *Learning from Las Vegas (figure 1)*.[18] The bold red arrow points left, but within its staff, a stencilled yellow symbol of a hand with an extended digit points in the opposite direction. Here I am reminded of a passage in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* "...in which a person naturally reacted to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction of the line

17 / Venturi et. al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 4.

18 / Venturi, Robert and Denise Scott Brown. 1968. "A Significance for A & P Parking Lots or Learning from Las Vegas." *Architectural Forum*, fig. 1, 39.

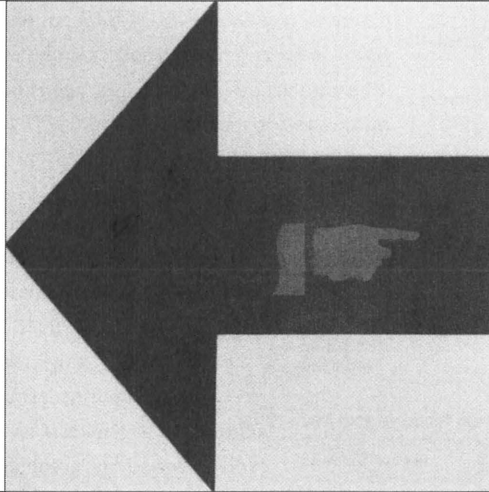

FIGURE 1 | *Allan D'Arcangelo, The Trip, in Learning from Las Vegas.*

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

from finger-tip to wrist, not from wrist to finger-tip."[19] Has the very act of "pointing" become an incoherent activity? Pointless? Do we rely on signs only when we don't know our way about? Can we be *certain* that signs will guide us in the right direction, as opposed to abandoning us to the uncertain criteria for differentiating between being lost and being found? Signs can always point to the doubt that we assume they are meant to assuage.

Under such conditions we might heed Scott Brown's words of wisdom: "Slow down—where do we go from here?"[20] Perhaps we should not be too precipitous in rushing for a perspicuous solution. After all, "genuine philosophy may begin in wonder but it continues in reluctance."[21] As Venturi noted in the preface to *Learning from Las Vegas*: "we think the more directions that architecture takes at this point, the better."[22] A passage that suggests we need to lose

19 / Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 185. Also see § 85.

20 / Scott Brown, "The Meaningful City," 28.

21 / Cavell, Stanley. 2002. "Ending the Waiting Game: A reading of Beckett's *Endgame*." *Must We Mean What We Say.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 127. I take it that Cavell is suggesting philosophy resist the urge to overcome wonder through "knowledge."

22 / Venturi et. al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, xi.

ourselves before we can find ourselves; an acknowledgement that loss is constitutive of finding a way in and for architecture. Las Vegas is the place that exemplifies the desire to *risk* being lost as internal to the human condition—to be at a loss, to lose, maybe even to be a loser. The sign architecture of Las Vegas beckons us to lose ourselves for a while.

Babble On

The architectural historian Vincent Scully once suggested that the power of Venturi's craft was his ability to transcend abstract formal manipulation and deal with meaning itself.[23] I am not sure what "meaning itself" might mean, but there sure was a preoccupation around this time with *Meaning in Architecture* to take the title of a well-known book published in 1970.[24] But in the dense signscape of Las Vegas it is more a matter of the surfeit of meaning; that is to say, Las Vegas is saturated with meaning, too meaning-ful, and thus on the very abyss of meaninglessness. Peter Blake suggested in his polemical book 1 (1964) that in order to counteract the stiff competition of advertising "that every bit of the billboard space must be made to work hard."[25] I take it that that is another way of saying that every bit of the poster space must "mean." Of course, this underscores the dilemma of language in commodity culture, in which the desire to make every word mean what it says is confronted with the vacuity and emptiness of what this effort is often put.

23 /
Scully, Vincent. 1969. *American Architecture and Urbanism.* NewYork: Praeger, 260.

24 /
Jencks, Charles, and George Baird, editors. 1970. *Meaning in Architecture.* New York: Braziller Inc.

25 /
Blake, Peter. 1964. *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape.* New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 12.

26 /
Cavell, "What Did Derrida Want of Austin?," 56-58.

27 /
Venturi, Robert and Denise Scott Brown. 1971. "Ugly and Ordinary Architecture or the Decorated Shed." *Architectural Forum*, 53.

But what Peter Blake clearly overlooks in his polemical book is that this "working hard" can never cleave apart the "serious" communicative task from what the ordinary language philosopher John Austin calls the "etiolations of language."[26] The merit of *Learning from Las Vegas* is that it clearly demonstrates that the signscape of Las Vegas is merely the hyperbolization of the fact that *all* utterances are vulnerable to deception and insincerity. As Venturi noted: "Manipulation is not the monopoly of

crass commercialism."[27] Any drive to demarcate the "manipulative city of kitsch" (the words are Kenneth Frampton's) from what Socrates in the *Republic* calls "our city of words"—the ideal rather than the actual city—is a deception in its own right.[28] Venturi and Scott Brown avoid the "bad utopian" drive to quarantine these false alternatives into their separate domains; a move that Peter Blake rushes into with his naive juxtaposition of the image of a "chaotic" commercial main street with the pristine neo-classical order of the University of Virginia. I can imagine Venturi and Scott Brown insisting that *this* is "our city," both the city as built and "our city of words" on the page we are reading. We are already participating in both its actual and eventual existence in our very response to the text in front of us. It is hardly surprising then that Venturi ends his first book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, by roundly criticizing these very images.

28 / Plato. 1945. *The Republic of Plato.* Francis MacDonald Cornford, translator. London: Oxford University Press, Book IX, 591. Also see Cavell, Stanley. 1990. "Introduction: Staying the Course." *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1-32.

29 / Poirier, Richard. May 20, 1967. "T.S. Eliot and the Literature of Waste." *New Republic*, 21. In its simplest terms, de-creative refers to the fact that Eliot works with the given urban materials at hand. Significantly, throughout the essay Poirier stresses Eliot's "skepticism about his own poetic enterprise."

30 / Reese, Teresa. 1980. "Rude Graphics, or Learning to Love Las Vegas." *Print*, 34.5, 45.

31 / Venturi et. al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 56. The quote is taken from August Heckscher's The Public Happiness (1962).

The task of the critic of "kulchur" is not to carve out meaning from chaos but to undo meaning. This "de-creative" impulse, as the literary critic Richard Poirier characterized T. S. Eliot's enterprise in an essay quoted in *Learning from Las Vegas*, is one response taken in the text.[29] But a "de-creative" impulse might just as well involve modes of overloading *as* those of draining. As Steven Izenour noted: "If we have any philosophy of [exhibition] design at all it's one of a kind of overload; we walk a thin line when it comes to boggling people's minds by offering lots of choices through juxtaposition – and maybe sometimes we fall over."[30] Contrary to Scully's claim, one might posit that Venturi and Scott Brown were not in fear of chaos, but of naked meaning. As Venturi put it: "Chaos is very near; its nearness, but its avoidance, gives...force."[31]

The reader encounters a direct tarrying with the very possibility of the communication enterprise in a sequence of astonishing images in *Learning from Las Vegas* under

the section entitled "Symbol in Space before form in Space: Las Vegas as a Communication System." Images 3-6 are a sequence of small cropped photographs of Las Vegas signs at night that produce the following "sentence": "Welcome To Fabulous Las Vegas, Free Aspirin –Ask Us Any-Thing, Vacancy, Gas" *(figure 2)*.[32] The neon signs are literally translated into the above-mentioned sentence on the adjacent page. In the third part of *Learning from Las Vegas*, Venturi returns to these signs suggesting that they are not only Pop Art but also pop literature. No doubt this sentence is reminiscent of the so-called pop literature of Tom Wolfe, or of other examples of 'found poetry.' But then is Eliot's writing pop literature, with its mix of "Sweeney and Latin" as Scott Brown put it? Surely there is more going on here than *merely* pop literature. Is this sentence an acknowledgment that all "our" words and sentences were never solely "ours" to begin with? Under such conditions how we can mean what we say becomes pressing.

Could we not read the "Vacancy" sign in bright orange neon, and the barely discernible unlit "No" directly above it, ready to be activated at a moment's notice, as emblematic of the tarrying with the plenitude or voidness of meaning in *Learning from Las Vegas*? These are the two major voices I hear in the text (there are others): one taking an extreme skeptical stance in its erasure of context and the denial of shared meaning; and the other, equally insistent, arguing for the recovery of context and meaning.[33] For example, in constructing the "grammatical" sentence out of the neon signs there has been a radical insertion of "context" into the discontinuous and paratactic word/images: a comma here, a dash there, the omission of "Nevada" in the first image, a period to put an end to it all.[34] It is as if the Las Vegas "Strip" in *Learning from Las Vegas* is not only about *that* burlesque show, but also about "stripping" criteria for meaning and context in order to explore the very conditions of possibility for communication as such. One might say that Venturi and Scott

32 /
Venturi et. al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 5. There are other examples of such neon sentences in Venturi and Scott Brown's work.

33 /
Here I am drawing on Cavell's frequent references to the multiple voices in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Richard Poirier also refers to the multiple voices in Eliot's The Waste Land. "The Literature of Waste," 20.

34 /
Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 112, "I was registering my sense of skepticism's work as precisely removing our access to context, to the before and after, the ins and outs, of an expression."

FIGURE 2 | *Welcome To Fabulous Las Vegas, Free Aspirin–Ask Us Anything, Vacancy, Gas.*

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

Brown are "strippers" in a melodrama of the self in a struggle with words. In the words of Venturi: "I am an exhibitionist: I go around exposing my doubts."[35]

It has always struck me that the neon sentence looks like one of those clichéd ransom letters seen in old movies or magazines where the letters and words are ripped and pieced together from different typefaces and print media. Are we common criminals that need to steal our language back, or have we always already had it stolen from us–willingly? Are we victims of meaning? Are Venturi and Scott Brown suggesting, in the spirit of T. S. Eliot, that architecture is a mug's game, a rogue's gallery? In the words of Eliot: "Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal."[36] Or do these sequence of images read more like Adorno's characterization of the telegram with its "mutilated language condensed to carry the maximum information combined with the urgency of delivery [that] imparts the shock of immediate domination in the form of immediate horror."[37] Adorno's passage on the telegram is reminiscent of Venturi's aphorism about Las Vegas: "The city of signs spewing the vital if vulgar iconography of now–*terribilità* verging on *orribilità*."[38] But Venturi and Scott Brown's comment from another article also needs to be taken into consideration: "Themes for today should be specific, immediate and urgent, like a letter

35 / Venturi, Robert. 1996. "Mal Mots: Aphorisms–Sweet and Sour–By an Anti-Hero Architect." *Iconography and Electronics Upon a Generic Architecture: A View from the Drafting Room.* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 299.

36 / Eliot, T.S. 1951 "Philip Massinger." *Selected Essays.* London: Faber, 206.

37 / Adorno, Theodore W. 2001. "The Schema of Mass Culture." In Bernstein, J.M., editor. *The Culture Industry.* London: Routledge, 96.

38 / Venturi. "A Series of Responses for VIA, the Journal of the School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania," *Iconography and Electronics,* 150.

39 / Scott Brown, Denise and Robert Venturi. 1969. "The Bicentennial Commemoration 1976." *The Architectural Forum,* 66.

from the front."[39] Sometimes that letter sends bad news, sometimes it conveys longing for love and home, sometimes it is a message of despair...or hope. Sometimes it is marked "return to sender."

Can we find what we need or want in this kind of environment? Venturi and Scott Brown seem to suggest that we can without too much struggle: "How is it that in spite of 'noise' from competing signs we do in fact find what we want on the strip?"[40] I am sure the "noise" that Venturi and Scott Brown refer to in their Socratic question alludes to the title of Tom Wolfe's famous essay, "Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can't hear You! Too Noisy) Las Vegas!!!!"[41] Despite the appearance that Venturi and Scott Brown want to make a sharp differentiation between noise and unhindered communication, this bifurcation is undone even before one opens the book. The difficulties in parsing out chatter from "meaningful" communication—the fact that there are no strict criteria for differentiating them—is immediately encountered in the wonderful glassine dust jacket that covered the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas (figure 3)*.[42]

The jacket consists of slogans/section headings from the book printed in large black classical font that continues over onto the back cover. The title *Learning from Las Vegas* on the second line is identified with red lettering and is thus picked out from the "black noise" of the rest of the text. The attached color reproduction of the famous "Tan Hawaiian with Tanya" image, the gold stamped title LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS [all in caps], and the names of the authors are found on the cloth cover, and can be seen through the semi-opaque dust jacket. The large gold lettering of *Learning from Las Vegas* is overlayed by the black lettering on the dust cover creating a palimpsest of sorts.[43] Although the title in red is picked out from the surrounding typeface it is in turn challenged by the gold embossed title seen through the layer of black lettering. If the title is supposed to point

40 /
Venturi et. al., *Learning From Las Vegas*, 4.

41 /
Wolfe, Tom. 1966. *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby.* London: Jonathan Cape, 3-28. Significantly, Heidegger described the everyday as "noise."

42 /
In most readily available copies of the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* the dust jacket has been removed or destroyed. On "chatter" see Fenves, Peter. 1993. *"Chatter": Language and History in Kierkegaard.* Stanford: Stanford University Press. On Venturi and Scott Brown's dissatisfaction with the design of the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* see Michael Golec's essay "Doing it Deadpan."

43 /
The lettering on the sides of the Tanya image not only frames it but also literally begins to invade its gold border along the right hand margin.

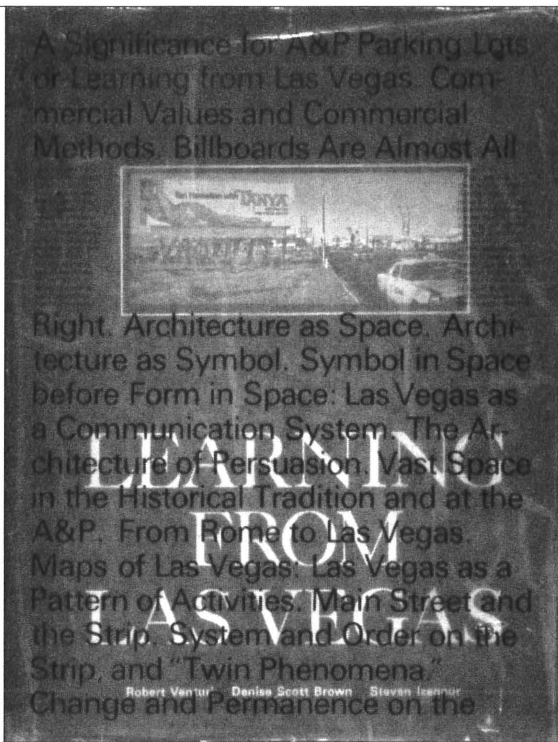

FIGURE 3 | *Glassine Dust Jacket, Learning from Las Vegas.*

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

to a literal "scene of instruction," a "Learning from...," it seems to be undermined by its own doubling or "con-tra-diction." The title is itself a repetitive slogan no different from the surrounding slogans/section headings. The cover erases context; it is a litany of one-liners divorced from any "thick" explanatory before and after. This erasure of context is not restricted to the mere cover of a much richer interior text; it is basic to the very conditions of the business of practicing architecture. As Venturi noted: "We architects can travel 3,000 miles for a three-quarter-hour interview where we have to be sloganeers and showmen rather than thinkers and doers."[44]

44 / Venturi, *Iconography and Electronics*, 322.

Commentators have often criticized the choice of the "Tan Hawaiian with Tanya" image as the emblematic frontispiece to the text as a whole. As Neil Leach has so bluntly put it: "a tanned bikini-clad figure is used to promote a suntan lotion, in a poster that blatantly exploits female sexuality."[45] But can we in all credulity assume that Venturi and Scott Brown were oblivious to the fact that instruction is of a piece with provocation? In a book that traffics in commodified words and images they don't have a clue to their price? What they cost? The Tanya image, however, begins to look more critical in light of the constant project of "stripping" away criteria in *Learning from Las Vegas*, such that we can't be sure of identifying any scene of instruction, or any scene of instruction we would want to identify with.

There is a striking image in Scott Brown and Venturi's essay "The Bicentennial Commemoration 1976" (1969) that brings the Tanya billboard into the constellation of issues I am talking about.[46] It consists of schematic rectangular buildings with comic book-like speech balloons/large signs "tethered" to them or near them (more on tethering and speech balloons later). The signs read "EXIT," "PROCESS," "LOVE & LEARN," "SOUVENIR."[47] Although the LOVE & LEARN sign is referred to as such in the text of the article, what we see and hear in this image is "LOVE & LEAR." The "N" is occluded by the rectangular sign that reads "SOUVENIR." Are we to couple love and learn, love and (King) Lear, or love and leer? Should we "learn from" or "leer at" the billboard architecture of the "strip." The often abrupt, even precipitous, movements between the plenitude and paucity of meaning in *Learning from Las Vegas* is exemplified in this image, just as the bikini-clad image of Tanya adorning the front cover of the book provides a striking contrast to Venturi and Scott Brown's loving and learning together in Las Vegas. Both "profane and profound messages" are found in the city.[48] Sometimes they are separated by a mere hair's breadth.

45 / Leach, Neil. 1999. *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 4.

46 / Scott Brown and Venturi, "The Bicentennial Commemoration 1976," 69.

47 / The "r" in "Souvenir" is also cut off by the image's outer frame.

48 / Scott Brown, Denise and Robert Venturi. 1973. "Highway." *Modulus* 9, 12.

Speech Balloons, Other Minds and the Tethering of Language

One of the primary critiques of modernism that *Learning from Las Vegas* was engaged in, as Frederic Jameson clearly noted, was the dialectic between inside and outside and the assumption that the outside expressed the interior.[49] Let's call this the modernist drive for "expressive transparency." In Las Vegas the "false fronts," contrasts in styles ("Moorish in front and Tudor behind"), and the exaggerated separation of interior space from the external environment provide counter-examples to the modernist organic building which was designed from the inside out with an eye to consistency and legibility, but has now manifested its twisted logic in post-war architecture where the "expressive aim has distorted the whole."

49 / Jameson, Frederic. 1988. "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology." *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays*, 1971-1986. Volume 2. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 59.

50 / Carrier, David. 2000. *The Aesthetics of Comics.* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 30.

51 / Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 351-2.

How does this drive for expressive transparency link up to skepticism about "other minds"? Simply put, skepticism about other minds is also fundamentally concerned with the relationship between the inner and the outer, transparency and opacity. The possibility of skepticism arises in the potential gap between the indirect ways in which I know your thoughts and the assumed immediate intuition in which they are revealed to you.[50] The tarrying with the skeptical dilemma about knowing other minds, articulated by the difficulties of expressive transparency, is worked out in the famous contrast between the "duck" and "decorated shed" in *Learning from Las Vegas*. The expressionistic relationship between interior and exterior is exemplified by the architectural duck, and is contrasted to their radical disjunction in the decorated shed. The duck in *Learning from Las Vegas* is a sign of the death throws of expressionist transparency pushed to its limits; the self qua architecture caught between the nightmare of suffocating privacy and one of public betrayal.[51] With the duck, the entire building becomes an ornament to its own communicative impasse.

The decorated shed, on the other hand, attempts to enact a certain "screened unknowingness" that acknowledges that muteness and unadulterated meaning are false alter-

natives. I take it that the speech balloon/large sign in the decorated shed images–the sign (reading "Eat") that separates the car from the building–is key to this ethical claim and intimately connected to skepticism about other minds. David Carrier has brilliantly suggested that comic book speech balloons attempt to overcome the skepticism of other minds by revealing another (fictional) person's thoughts displayed transparently to the reader.[52] But one could just as easily argue that sophisticated uses of speech balloons (and sophisticated cartoons) are merely another manifestation of the skeptical dilemma and not a fantasy about its overcoming.

Although one has to wait until the end of the second part of *Learning from Las Vegas* to encounter speech balloons in their cartoon form in an image from the "Learning from Levittown" studio, they are clearly evident as literal balloons in the famous images of the decorated shed.[53] In the versions of the decorated shed leading up to and including the one published in *Learning from Las Vegas*, the quivering line of the pole carrying the "eat" sign looks more like a string attached to a balloon than a solid supporting structure. The speech balloon is literally untethered from its source, the architecture itself, and placed slightly in front of or farther away from the shed-like structure. Who or what, if anyone or anything, is speaking here? As Carrier notes: "the balloon must be attached to something, whether person or alien, capable of thinking. Car tires go "Screech" and bombs "Boom!" but only beings capable of thought, like the great Saul Steinberg's chair dreaming of being a rocking horse, can have balloons attached to them."[54] It is as if the "voice" is separated from its body thus undermining any claim to expressive transparency. According to Carrier it is also paramount that the "things" or characters in the fictional scene do not acknowledge the speech balloons *as* speech balloons.[55] If I am not mistaken, the little poolings of ink in the eye-like

52 /
Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 73-4.

53 /
Denise Scott Brown had written about the use of the comic strip form and speech balloons in her commentary on Archigram's pamphlet number four. See Brown, Denise Scott. July 1968. "Little Magazines in Architecture and Urbanism." *AIP Journal*, 228.

54 /
Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 32-33.

55 /
Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 29-30.

building windows of earlier renditions of the duck and decorated shed images look remarkably like tiny pupils looking up at the separation of language from its physical body.[56] The speech balloon comes between us and other minds; a process exemplified by the sign physically separating the car from the building. Is this an acknowledgment of the struggle for meaning with words that necessarily separate us and bind us together? Is it a demand that we take responsibility for what comes between us? For what we are willing to ingest or expel? Sometimes what we "eat" – or speak – nourishes us; sometimes it leaves us unsatisfied, hungering for something else.

It should be clear that it is manifestly inaccurate to claim, as some critics have, that Venturi and Scott Brown are reviving a kind of *architecture parlante*; a desire that each stone might speak and directly express the inner nature of the building.[57] Their practice is radically not logocentric, and an *architecture parlante* is eminently so. Paul de Man has defined logocentrism as "the unmediated presence of the self to its own voice as opposed to the reflective distance that separates this self from the written word"[58] How far is the "self" separated from the written word, if not its own voice in those words? One always wonders if these balloon signs could untether and yank the words air born, away from us, as they ascend in their unbearable lightness. Nevertheless we are still *tethered* to those words; a connection that Cavell interprets as meaning "that my words fly from me *and* stick to me."[59] Could one imagine purposefully bursting those balloons, or the balloons just bursting of their own accord because of rising too high? Is that a "Pop" architecture that might be worth thinking about?[60] Where would these words take their fall?

56 /
Here I am thinking of the duck and decorated shed image in "A Significance for A & P Parking Lots or Learning from Las Vegas," fig. 2, 39.

57 /
Claude-Nicolas Ledoux is usually the architect drawn upon to characterize this position. Detlef Mertins has succinctly analyzed the basic contours of an *architecture parlante* as follows: "...eighteenth-century critiques of rhetoric, theatricality, and allegory sparked formal experiments in architecture that sought to eliminate the use of conventions or applied signs in favor of the direct expression of the inner nature of a building." Mertins, Detlef. 1996. "The Shells of Architectural Thought." In Hejduk's *Chronotope*. K. Michael Hays, editor. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 32.

58 /
de Man, Paul. 1983. "The Rhetoric of Blindness." *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 114. Venturi and Scott Brown are still interested in the voice, or better yet the pitch of architecture, a matter I return to towards the end of this essay.

59 /
Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 123.

60 /
It is interesting to note that Colin Rowe had the following to say about Venturi's Yale Mathematics building: "It is thus we may have the feeling, after protracted contemplation of Venturi's project, that we are in the presence of a distended balloon, that something is about to burst..." Rowe, Colin. 1976. "Robert Venturi and the Yale Mathematics Building." *Oppositions* 6, 17.

Fallen Words

I like to imagine them crash landing across pages twenty and twenty one of the original version of *Learning from Las Vegas (figure 4)*.[61] On these pages we encounter an astonishing map of the Las Vegas strip that shows "every written word seen from the road." These signs are not seen in their vertical position, standing for something, but as if all the words on the strip had fallen to the ground too weak to stand on their own; too weak to compete with each other or for our attention; or, as if the words were straining under their burden to "mean" and had escaped their upright constraints scattering on the ground. Thrown out on the street, so to speak. Perhaps we need to be, in the words of Cavell, "...looking philosophically as it were beneath our feet rather than over our heads."[62] Of course that is assuming we are coming to the scene after the fact, otherwise looking beneath our feet might be a dangerous endeavor indeed!

We might stumble or trip over these scattered words.[63] Who knows, maybe Venturi and Scott Brown might want them there – consciously or unconsciously – precisely because of that risk. I like to think of their "ambivalence" in terms of a particularly revealing "symbolic and compulsive act" from Freud's analysis of the Rat Man:

One day, when his lady was due to go to the country, he [the rat man] took a walk, in the course of which his foot knocked against a stone. He kicked the stone out of the way, because, he reflected, his lady might shortly pass along this road, she might come to grief. Twenty minutes or so later, the Rat Man thought what he had done absurd, and he walked over to the stone, picked it up, and replaced it in the middle of the road.[64]

A more literal example of this stumbling might be Venturi and Scott Brown's Franklin Court restoration on the excavated site of Benjamin Franklin's home in Philadelphia. The excerpts from Franklin's letters and household records describing the house were inscribed in the rough paving stones underneath the bare structural

61 / Due to the economizing of images in the second edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the fallout there is limited to one small image instead of a giant two-page spread.

62 / Cavell, "Declining Decline," 34.

63 / I realize that my language of stumbling suggests walking rather than the experience of Las Vegas through the mediation of the car that is stressed in *Learning from Las Vegas*. However, if one pays attention to the allegorical dimensions of the text as exemplifying the struggle with language it can allow us to explore many of the physical dimensions of this encounter that are overlooked when its manifest content is overemphasized. Thus, I am suggesting we should literally pay attention to the "underwriting" of *Learning from Las Vegas*. In Derridean terms we might characterize this stumbling as a "pas-de-sens;" however, I do not think that quite captures what is going on in these pages.

64 / Freud, Sigmund. 1963. "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis (1909)." *Three Case Histories*. New York: Collier Books, 48.

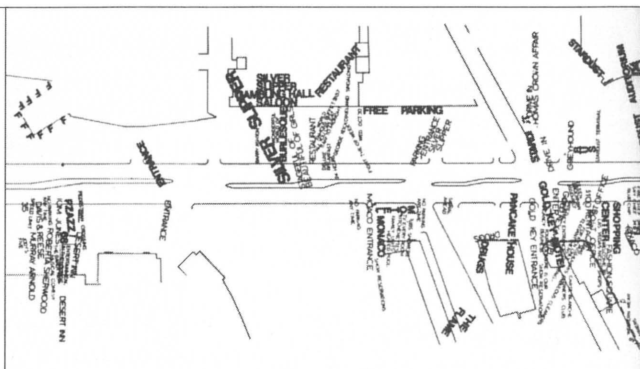

FIGURE 4 | *Map of Las Vegas showing every writing word seen from the road.*

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

frame of the house. Here a passage from Baudelaire seems to strike the right tone: "Stumbling over words as over cobblestones, colliding now and then with long-dreamed-of verses."[65] It is as if wording the world – the literal tagging of word or phrase to some particular "block" of experience – is also our stumbling block, our collision with "long-dreamed of verses."

Even Descartes' dream of a philosophical "bedrock" is also uneven when it comes to words – even when just thinking about them: "But it is surprising how prone my mind is to errors. Although I am considering these points within myself silently and without speaking, yet I stumble over words and am almost deceived by ordinary language."[66] Or is it more in the vein of Wittgenstein's dumb, brutal and deliberate "bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language"?[67] I guess "understanding" is thick headed – one certainly hopes so for its sake. Cavell sums it up best: "The capacity for understanding is the same as the capacity for misunderstanding, as the capacities for walking

65 / Benjamin, Walter. 1968. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections.* New York: Schocken Books, 164. The passage is from Baudelaire's "Le Soleil" from Les Fleurs du Mal.

66 / Descartes, René. 1971. "Second Meditation." *Descartes: Philosophical Writings.* Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach, translators and editors. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 73.

67 / Cavell, Stanley. 1981. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 78. I am not taking this as Wittgenstein's final say in the manner. It is, I assume, a *grammatical* joke, and thus it runs deep and is taken up again in various sections of the *Philosophical Investigations.*

and talking are the same as the capacities for stumbling and stammering."[68]

68 / Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy,* 111.

69 / O'Hara, Frank. 1995. "Biotherm (For Bill Berkson)." *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara.* Donald Allen, editor. Berkeley: University of California Press, 444.

70 / Gottdiener, M et. al. 1999. *Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All-American City.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 67.

71 / Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1969. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* R.J. Hollingdale, translator. New York: Penguin Classics, 45-6.

Venturi and Scott Brown do not come down on either side of the possibility or impossibility of wording the world: neither for communication nor for "vapid sub-communication." The following line from the poet Frank O'Hara captures their enterprise quite nicely: "I am guarding it from mess and message."[69] This is reminiscent of one of Venturi's oft cited aphorisms: "mess is more." It could be taken as a silly reworking of Mies Van der Rohe's "less is more." I prefer to read it as a slightly more terse version of O'Hara's passage.

Blinking Signs and the Question of the "Last Man"

One can't avoid the blinking, flashing lights of Las Vegas. They are everywhere: in the streets, in the casinos, in the airports. Here is how one author has described it: "they're all moving–flickering, twitching, blinking; turning on and off; running up and down and across; shooting across space and back again; starting at the bottom, speeding to the top, and exploding."[70] I take this "blinking" to be exemplary of the full-blown tarrying with skepticism in *Learning from Las Vegas.* It is the hyper-American version of Nietzsche's "Last Man" who makes his dramatic appearance in the Prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* Nietzsche's passage on the "Last Man" is worth quoting at length:

Must one first shatter their ears to teach them to hear with their eyes? Must one rumble like drums and Lenten preachers? Or do they believe only those who stammer? They have something of which they are proud. What is it called that makes them proud? They call it culture, it distinguishes them from the goatherds. Therefore they dislike hearing the word "contempt" spoken of them. So I shall speak to their pride. So I shall speak to them of the most contemptible man: and that is the last man... I tell you: one must have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you: you still have chaos in you. Alas! The time is coming when man will give birth to no more stars. Alas! The time of the most contemptible man is coming, the man who can no longer despise himself. Behold! I shall show you the *last man.* What is Love? What is Creation? What is Longing What is a Star? thus asks the last man and blinks..."We have discovered happiness," say the Last Men and blink.[71]

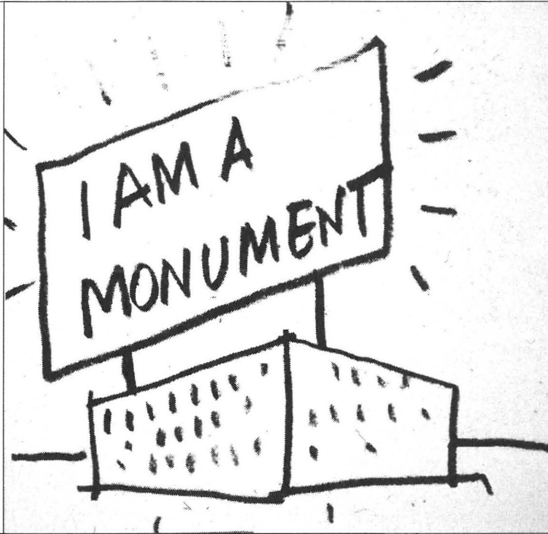

FIGURE 5 | *I am a Monument.*

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

Is the emptiness of the Last Man emblematized by Venturi and Scott Brown's ugly, ordinary and dumb conventional building with a "blinking sign on top saying I AM A MONUMENT" *(figure 5)*?[72]

Adorno's version of Nietzsche's "no more dancing stars" takes us back to Las Vegas: "The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death."[73] Or think of Eliot's "London Tube" passage from his *Four Quartets*: "Only a flicker over the strained time-ridden faces, distracted from distraction by distraction, filled with fancies and empty of meaning..."[74] I take it that the images in *Learning from Las Vegas* of the automaton-like men and women pulling the levers on the slot machines on Freemont Street are an instantiation of something like Eliot's phrase (or Walter Benjamin's writings on gambling for that matter).

72 / Venturi et. al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 99. Tom Wolfe characterized their entire enterprise as "Venturi's Big Wink." See Wolfe, Tom. 1981. *From Bauhaus to our House*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 114.

73 / Adorno, "Schema of Mass Culture," 96.

74 / Eliot, "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets*, 10.

What I am trying to lead up to is the following: if the eruption of blinking, flashing lights in Las Vegas is the counterpart of the last man's blinking eye, then can one really avoid the vacant bliss captured in the eyes of those men who have discovered happiness and "love the world"? What would it take to fall in love with the world? Descartes' way to avoid all sensory deception was the following: "I will now shut my eyes, stop my ears, withdraw all my senses."[75] This did not work for the psychotic Daniel Schreber, who had quite a different understanding of what he called, like Descartes, "seeing with the mind's eye": "I see such events even with my eyes closed and where sound is concerned would hear them as in the case of the "voices," even if it were possible to seal my ears hermetically against all other sounds."[76] And remember that Descartes could still stumble over ordinary words by just thinking about them. We can close our eyes and try to make our dissatisfaction and doubt go away, but in the process we are avoiding the world we actually live in. In the words of Denise Scott Brown: "...if activities which appear to be 'dysfunctional' continue to exist, they must obviously be functional for someone, ergo closing one's eyes and ordering them to go away won't remove them."[77] But there is a further dilemma: in shutting our eyes we are closing ourselves off from the skepticism that marks our disenchantment with the world—*and* our enchantment with it.

75 /
Descartes, "Third Meditation," *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, 76.

76 /
Sass, Louis. 1994. *The Paradoxes of Delusion: Wittgenstein, Schreber, and the Schizophrenic Mind.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 43.

77 /
Scott Brown, Denise. 1969. "On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35.3, 185.

Eyes shut. Eyes Open. Both extremes are untenable. Think of the game children play of staring into each other's eyes until one "gives in" and blinks. In this contest the blinking—the brief closing of the eye—is an acknowledgment of defeat. But, do we really know who is the winner and the loser in this "infantile" game? After all, isn't the ability to keep one's eyes open at all times monstrous? Think of the opening of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* in which Alex de Large stares out at us without blinking, a fact accentuated by the false

FIGURE 5 | *Alex de Large's Eye, Stanley Kubrick, A Clockwork Orange.*

eyelash over one eye. And what about the Ludovico treatment to which Alex is subjected? Doctors Brodsky and Branum clamp the lidlocks on Alex and force him to "viddie nasty bits of ol' ultra-violence" on the screen while an assistant lubricates his "glassies" at various intervals. I see this as an allegory and pharmakon for Alex's own monstrousness (and others as well). What can one make of the fact that the blinking sign "I AM A MONUMENT" shares a striking family resemblance with Alex's exaggerated open eye *(figure 6)*? Inhuman? The wide-eyed wonder of a baby?

Blinking is not an *open* or *shut* case. It is the tone or rhythm of the "blinking" that counts. I take this rhythm to be encapsulated in the many alternations of night and day images that are ubiquitous in *Learning from Las Vegas*. One might say that this diurnality, the ordinary, is something to be achieved over and over again. It is a gamble that would risk both enchantment and disenchantment when at dawn the lights go on blinking in the very first

light of day—and die out only to begin again. It is the sequence of night and day, the extraordinary possibilities latent in the ordinary, which marks out the contours of our commitment to engage with these possibilities. Architecture is never simply "enilated" by the bright lights of advertising as Baudrillard has argued. In the light of day, the contours of a fuller life creep into view (that fuller view might be creepy as well, but that is ours to deal with).[78]

Venturi and Scott Brown seem to be arguing that we need to be responsive to our environment which requires repeated acts of looking and acknowledging. At times we need to see this blinking "...as a wince, and connect the wince with something in the world that there is to be winced at..."[79] At times we might follow the lead of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said:

> When I converse with a profound mind...or have good thoughts, I do not at once arrive at satisfactions, as when, being thirsty I drink water...; no! but I am first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life. By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light.[80]

Venturi and Scott Brown do not sit on the fence: they put their pulse on the rhythm of the skeptical dilemma that does not call for easy solutions, despair, unadulterated ecstasy or nihilistic pessimism. The rhythm is interesting enough. What I find *ethically* seductive in *Learning from Las Vegas* is the emphasis placed on how we acknowledge or refuse to acknowledge our responsiveness, and hence our responsibility, to the actual environment we live in now and to the eventual one that will emerge from it. To paraphrase Vincent Scully's introduction to *Complexity and Contradiction* which could be an even more appropriate introduction to *Learning from Las Vegas*: "This is not an easy book, and is not for those who, lest they offend them, pluck out their eyes."[81]

78 / Sometimes it is difficult to make out these contours when the sun sets every hour in the Caeser's Forum Shopping Mall.

79 / Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 354,

80 / Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1990. "Experience." *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems.* New York: Bantam Books, 239.

81 / Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 11. Scully's passage is as follows: "This is not an easy book. It requires professional commitment and close visual attention, and is not for those architects who, lest they offend them, pluck out their eyes."

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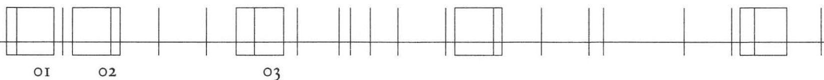

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LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS... and *Los Angeles* and *Reyner Banham*

ABSTRACT

The influential British architectural historian and theorist Reyner Banham (1922-1988) belonged to the same generation as Robert Venturi (b.1925) and Denise Scott Brown (b.1931) and shared many of their architectural values. This essay shows the great similarities of value and outlook in *Learning from Las Vegas* and Banham's almost contemporaneous *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971). It then pinpoints areas of disagreement between Venturi et al. and Banham and moves to a discussion of the different authors' views on Las Vegas, drawing on other texts written by Banham around this time. It reveals that the Venturi et al. version of Las Vegas's significance was not the only one in currency in the period when *Learning from Las Vegas* appeared in its first and second editions, and that the different interpretations of Las Vegas reveal contested architectural values during the period when Modernist values were being challenged by Post-Modern ones.

Learning from Las Vegas has much in common with Banham's *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, and both reveal a permissive sensibility that is symptomatic of the time they were written. The first part of this paper looks at the shared values and parallels between the two books before moving on to significant differences of interpretation about the relationship of Pop and "high" culture. This is followed by Banham's own interpretation of Las Vegas which, while overlapping with much of Venturi et al.'s, suggests some markedly different lessons.

Challenging Orthodoxies

The sort of orthodoxy Venturi et al. and Banham challenged was expressed by Nikolaus Pevsner in *An Outline of European Architecture*, first published in 1943 and receiving its sixth edition in 1960. "A bicycle shed is a building," the introduction commences, "Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of

architecture." This distinction can be traced back to Ruskinian ideas about fundamental differences between architecture and building but, as a Modernist, Pevsner rejects Ruskin's prioritization of ornament and decoration in order to codify a twentieth century, but supposedly transhistorical, aesthetic of architecture which has three aspects:

First, [aesthetic sensations] may be produced by the treatment of walls, proportions of windows, the relation of wall-space to window-space.... Secondly, the treatment of the exterior of a building as a whole is aesthetically significant, its contrasts of block against block.... Thirdly, there is the effect of our senses of the treatment of the interior, the sequence of rooms...." Not only are the types of architectural aesthetics described as distinct categories, but they are hierarchical: it is only the third which is unique to architecture: "What distinguishes architecture from painting and sculpture is its spatial quality. In this, and only in this, no other artist can emulate the architect. Thus the history of architecture is primarily a history of man shaping space...[1]

The tendency to categorize hierarchically in order to define the supposed essentialism of a discipline was typical of other arts up to the 1960s. As regards painting, for example, Clement Greenberg, the great proponent of Abstract Expressionism and Post-Painterly Abstraction, contemporaneously with Pevsner's sixth edition of his *Outline*, published his "Modernist Painting" essay in which he proposed that the artist should seek "that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art." Painting, it followed, might be expected to concentrate on "the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment."[2] The reason for this way of thinking about the arts was not just a Victorian-like tendency for categorization, or even a desire for the operation of a certain kind of logic, rather it was because, as Greenberg argues, "it would, to be sure, narrow [a discipline's] area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of that area all the more certain."[3] That commitment to "certainty," with its quest for essentialism and purity, demanded an attitude and aes-

1 / Pevsner, Nikolaus. 1960. *An Outline of European Architecture.* London: Pelican Books, 7.

2 / Greenberg, Clement. 1960. "Modernist Painting." In O'Brian, John, editor. *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism.* Volume 4. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 86.

3 / Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 86.

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thetic of exclusiveness, and rejected anything that espoused the more inclusive and immediate values of commercialism. Popular culture was summarily dismissed as "ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who [are] insensitive to the values of genuine culture…."[4] Nor did Greenberg welcome the excitingly uncertain and insecure future of the time, open as it was to the "spirit of exploration and experiment" as the pioneer Happenings artist Allan Kaprow put it.[5] In art in the 1960s, the challenge to orthodoxies included Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptual art, Land art, Environments, Happenings and Performances. In architecture, a parallel experimentation was at its most radical in projects emanating from Archigram, Cedric Price, Haus-Rucker-Co, Superstudio, Coop. Himmelblau, Eventstructures Research Group, Ant Farm, Archizoom and Experiments in Art and Technology, among others. 1972 was not only the year of the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, it also witnessed the publication of the English language edition of Jim Burns' *Arthropods: New Urban Futures*, the appropriately-named *Art Without Boundaries*, and Harold Rosenberg's *De-Definition of Art*, all symptomatic of the mood of experimentation and challenge to orthodoxies.[6]

4 / Greenberg, Clement. 1939. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." In O'Brian, John, editor. Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, volume 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 12.

5 / Kaprow, Allan. 1965. "From Assemblages, Environments and Happenings." In Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood, editors. *Art in Theory: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford: Blackwell, 708.

6 / Burns, Jim. 1972. *Arthropods: New Urban Futures*. London: Academy; Woods, Gerald, Philip Thompson, John Williams. 1972. *Art Without Boundaries: 1950-70*. London: Thames & Hudson; Rosenberg, Harold. 1972. *The De-Definition of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

7 / Krauss, Rosalind. 1979. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." In Foster, Hal, editor. 1985. *Postmodern Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 31-42. These quotes: 31.

8 / Foster, *Postmodern Culture*, 38.

The change that was occurring in the arts in the 1960s was nothing less than a paradigm shift, and is best summed up in Rosalind Krauss' phrase "the expanded field." Writing in 1979 in relation to sculpture, Krauss commented on the way that the category "sculpture" had been "kneaded and stretched and twisted" during the 1960s and '70s to the extent that it may "include just about anything"[7] from video installations, through earthworks, to minimally-material concepts – it had become "a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities."[8] Venturi et al. and Banham were doing something closely akin to this: challenging orthodoxies and thinking through differently structured possibilities so

that the dualistic division into "cathedral or bicycle shed" could become, *inter alia*, cathedral as (decorated) bicycle shed (as may apply to Venturi et al.), or even cathedral *and* bicycle shed (as Banham might have argued). Banham's two most important books of the 1960s were *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1960) and *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment* (1969). The former reassessed the contribution and importance of the Expressionist wing of Modernism that had been dismissed by historians like Pevsner in favor of the *sachlichkeit*, classical one. The latter examined the history, impact and significance of mechanical services in relation to built form, and the extent to which conventional assumptions about "architecture" might be superseded by the more inclusive concept of "fit environment for human activities."[9] Thus *Theory and Design* could, in effect, be thought of in terms of offering some alternative, radical cathedral designs from those that Pevsner had lauded, whereas *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment* would not necessarily exclude all cathedrals, but it was more likely to focus on the importance of bicycle sheds because a) they had been dismissed by previous generations of historians as unworthy of appreciation and b) they might be an intelligent and functional solution to a problem, rather than one shaped by cultural habits, traditions and customary practices.[10] Venturi was seriously challenging orthodoxies by the mid-1960s with, primarily, his call for "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" and his "Justification for a Pop Architecture." Scott Brown wrote "On Pop Art, Permissiveness and Planning" in 1969, following on from their original, controversial essay on the "Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas" published a year earlier.[11]

Learning from Las Vegas and *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies* challenged particular orthodoxies about

9 / See Whiteley, Nigel. 2002. *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future.* Cambridge: MIT Press, chapter 4.

10 / Banham himself did actually comment on Pevsner's distinction between Lincoln Cathedral and a bicycle shed: "Pevsner's remark is a snobbish put-down on a whole class of buildings. They are excluded from the category of architecture, not because they are ill-conceived or ugly, but because they contain bikes!" Banham, Reyner. 1973. "A real golden oldie." *New Society*, December 13, 667.

11 / Venturi, Robert. 1965. "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture." *Perspecta*, 9-10, 17-56; Venturi, Robert. "A Justification for a Pop Architecture." 1965. *Arts and Architecture*, April, 22. Scott Brown, Denise. 1969. "On Pop Art, Permissiveness and Planning." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, May, 184-186. Venturi, Robert and Denise Scott Brown. 1968. "Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or *Learning from Las Vegas*." *Architectural Forum*, March, 37-42ff.

what those cities represented. Las Vegas had been described by one eminent member of the design establishment as "...among the most brutal, degrading, and corrupt [cities] that consumer society has ever created.... [It] shows just what depths of communicative poverty can be reached by a city left to its own arbitrary development, responsive only to the needs of... casino and motel owners, and to the needs of real estate speculators."[12] Los Angeles, according to one commentator, was "...the noisiest, the smelliest, the most uncomfortable, and most uncivilized major city in the United States. In short a stinking sewer...."[13] The conventional wisdom was that the only lesson that could be learned from either city was that both rudely demonstrated the dangers of permissiveness and popular culture without the conventional controls and planning provided by supposedly responsible professionals.

Openness and inclusiveness

An attitude of openness and a commitment to inclusiveness are fundamental ingredients of both *Learning from Las Vegas* and *Los Angeles*. Both cities were characterized, according to their respective authors, by "inclusion." "...[T]he order of the Strip *includes*," wrote Venturi et al., "it includes at all levels, from a mixture of seemingly incongruous land uses to the mixture of seemingly incongruous advertising media plus a system of neo-Organic or neo-Wrightian restaurant motifs in Walnut Formica. It is not an order dominated by the expert and made easy for the eye. The moving eye in the moving body must work to pick out and interpret a variety of changing, juxtaposed orders...." The reward of this sort of environment was high: "vitality ... may be achieved by an architecture of inclusion...."[14] Diversity and pluralism were ends in themselves: "We think the more directions that architecture takes at this point, the better."[15] The alternative of a singular style, uniformity and order – the conventional architectural habits of thought – often resulted in an

12 / Maldonado, Tomás. 1972. *Design, Nature, and Revolution: Toward a Critical Ecology.* New York: Harper & Row, 60, 64.

13 / Raphael, Adam. 1968. Quoted in Banham, Reyner. 1973. *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies.* London: Pelican Books, 16.

14 / Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour. 1977. *Learning from Las Vegas.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 53.

15 / Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, xiii.

16 / Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 53.

overwhelming "deadness that results from too great a preoccupation with tastefulness and total design."[16] This meant that the architect and planner had to put aside their usual assumptions and even their professional taste culture. It was no good approaching Las Vegas with preconceived opinions: the architect had to suspend disbelief because, Venturi et al. argued, "withholding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything." One of the problems was that "Architects are out of the habit of looking nonjudgmentally at the environment...."[17] For all the professional's claimed open-mindedness, "there is a fine line between liberalism and old-fashioned class snobbery."[18]

That old-fashioned snobbery had also militated against Los Angeles being taken seriously by the architectural and planning professions. Books had tended to concentrate on the city's Modernist monuments by the Greene Brothers, Wright, Gill and Schindler, thereby excluding the commercial vernacular of hamburger bars and other forms of pop architecture at one extreme, and the freeway structures and other forms of civil engineering at the other. Both of these extremes, Banham argued, "are as crucial to the human ecologies and built environments of Los Angeles as are dated works in classified styles by named architects," for it is the "polymorphous architectures" which blend together to form the "comprehensible unity" that constitutes LA's identity.[19] The inclusiveness may lack order and a clearly defined form, and may even appear chaotic but, like Venturi et al. on Las Vegas, Banham wanted the visitor to LA to suspend their disbelief, otherwise he or she would experience "confusion rather than variety... because the context has escaped them...."[20] A necessary part of understanding the context was the ability to cope with movement as "the language of design, architecture, and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement.... [T]he city will never be

17 / Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 3.

18 / Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 155.

19 / Banham, Reyner. 1973. *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*. London: Pelican Books, 22-23.

20 / Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 23.

21 / Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 23.

fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diffuse urban texture, cannot go with the flow of its unprecedented life."[21] To do so–and admit its success–Banham argued, "threatens the intellectual repose and professional livelihood of many architects, artists, planners and environmentalists because it breaks the rules of urban design that they promulgate in works and writings and teach to their students."[22] Professionals, therefore, hated LA as much as they looked down at Las Vegas. However, Banham warned, "The common reflexes of hostility are not a defense of architectural values, but a negation of them, at least in so far as architecture has any part in the thoughts and aspirations of the human race beyond the little private world of the profession."[23] LA may have lacked conventional formal cohesion, but it undeniably offered a "sense of possibilities."[24]

22 / Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 236.

23 / Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 244.

24 / Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 243.

High and pop

Both Venturi et al. and Banham upheld a "both/and" acceptance of "high" and popular culture. *Learning from Las Vegas* was not an anti-Modernist diatribe: indeed, the authors clearly stated that "Because we have criticized Modern architecture, it is proper here to state our intense admiration of its early period when its founders, sensitive to their own times, proclaimed the right revolution. Our argument lies mainly with the irrelevant and distorted prolongation of that old revolution today."[25] Banham had often expressed similar sentiments in his attempt to reform Modernism and argue for a technologically-oriented architecture in keeping with the Second Machine Age, and in Los Angeles, he devotes a chapter to "The Exiles"–principally Gill, Schindler and Neutra–and their achievement in the 1920s, which he rates alongside the achievements of the European Masters. But an acceptance of Modernism, however qualified, did not necessarily contradict a love of Pop, and it is this for which both books are mostly remembered. Banham's chapter on California "Fantastic" architecture takes in such cele-

25 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, xiii.

brated Pop buildings as Grauman's Chinese Theatre, the Aztec Hotel, Tahitian Village and Brown Derby restaurants, Johnies diner, the Jack-in-the-Box hamburger stand and Disneyland, as well as the folk monument of Watts Towers. The sources are almost wholly Pop, and demonstrate "the validity of the commercial vernacular."[26] Both authors approvingly quote Tom Wolfe's writings about signs and electrographic architecture and the shift within Pop architecture to "whole structures designed primarily as pictures or representational sculpture."[27] However, this is the point where Venturi et al. and Banham part company.

Upward, downward, sideways

"...[L]earning from popular culture," Venturi et al. explained, "does not remove the architect from his or her status in high culture. But it may alter high culture to make it more sympathetic to current needs and issues."[28] Furthermore, "We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward."[29] Venturi et al. likens this approach as similar to the Pop artists like Roy Lichtenstein who plundered popular culture such as the comic strip in order to rejuvenate fine art. Lichtenstein was still a fine artist making unique works of it, but the subject matter was popular in its source. This is the approach Venturi et al. wanted the architect to adopt because it could lead to a relevant and popular architecture which met suburbanites' aspirations and tastes. Banham saw it differently. He diagnosed a "sliding scale of commercial frugality versus cultural or aesthetic status"[30] on which,

The lower down the scales of financial substance and cultural pretensions one goes, the better sense it apparently makes... to buy a plain standard building shell... and add symbolic garnish to the front, top, or other parts that show. It makes even better sense, of course, to acquire an existing disused building and impose your commercial personality on it with symbolic garnishes. But even if you are a major commercial operator with a chain of outlets... it still makes financial sense to put up relatively simple single-story boxes, and then make them tall enough to attract attention by piling up symbols and graphic art on top.[31]

26 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 6.

27 / Wolfe, Tom. Quoted in Banham. *Los Angeles*, 133-134; see also Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 52.

28 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 161.

29 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 3.

30 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 120.

31 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 119.

Banham was effectively describing the "decorated shed;" at the other extreme might be the "duck." But, although Banham and Venturi et al. were diagnosing the same cultural phenomenon, they drew quite different lessons. Whereas Venturi et al. wanted to use the commercial decorated shed as the model for a renewed serious architecture, Banham saw it as an end in itself. It represented a type within diversity that made up the "polymorphous architectures" of Los Angeles. Each of the different architectures existed on a continuum: all were valid and equal, and no particular one should necessarily learn from another. They were successful when they grew out of, and expressed, their own socio-cultural "ecology." Compared to this, with "high" drawing on "low," Venturi et al.'s model is vertical. At the "cultural status" end of the continuum, Banham praises the Case Study houses by Charles and Ray Eames, Craig Ellwood and Pierre Koenig that had grown out of the Miesian minimalist tradition, but which could be seen as an expression of a geographical and socio-cultural "ecology" of LA. There may be some lessons that this type of architecture could learn from commercial Pop, but they would be likely to be at the level of rethinking the home as a vehicle for a lifestyle rather than anything architecturally more radical or compromising. Fundamentally for Banham, architects' architecture should co-exist with Pop as parts of the greater whole.

Banham's "lesson" of Los Angeles, if lesson it be, was the diversity and richness of the city's "polymorphous architectures" as part of the experience of its openness and inclusiveness. While Venturi et al. implore the reader to "learn" from Las Vegas – even if this necessitated a suspension of disbelief about enjoyment of the place – Banham, on one level, really asks no more than to "enjoy" LA's "splendors and miseries... [and] graces and grotesqueries [because they] appear to me as unrepeatable as they are unprecedented...." Forget about learning from LA, he seems to be stating, because "it is immediately apparent that no city has ever been produced by such an extraordinary

321 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 24.

mixture of geography, climate, economics, demography, mechanics and culture; nor is it likely that an even remotely similar mixture will ever occur again."[32] But, of course, there is a lesson underneath the enjoyment that is that Los Angeles fundamentally challenges a deeply established professional orthodoxy:

Los Angeles emphatically suggests that there is no simple correlation between urban form and social form. Where it threatens the "human values"–oriented tradition of town planning inherited from Renaissance humanism it is in revealing how simple-mindedly mechanistic that supposedly humane tradition can be, how deeply attached to the mechanical fallacy that there is a necessary causal connection between built form and human life, between the mechanisms of the city and the styles of architecture practiced there.[33]

The lessons of Las Vegas were far more specific and transferable. Learning from Las Vegas was attempting nothing less than to "reassess the role of symbolism in architecture...."[34] In that sense, "Las Vegas is not the subject of our book. The symbolism of architectural form is."[35] Las Vegas was no more – and no less – than "a vivid initial source for symbolism in architecture. We have described in the Las Vegas study the victory of symbols-in-space over forms-in-space...."[36]

The difference between the lessons identified by Venturi et al. and Banham may be partly explained by the difference in audience for the books. Venturi et al. were writing as architects who seek "a new modesty in our designs and in our perception of our role as architects in society."[37] The reader is often assumed to be an architect for whom the lesson about architecture as symbol may transform her or his thinking about contemporary designing. *Los Angeles* was part of a series published by Pelican Books to "present the great architects, buildings and towns of the world in their social and cultural environments."[38] The readership was, therefore, wider than Venturi's – it was professional *and* lay.

33 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 237.

34 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, xvii.

35 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, xv.

36 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 119.

37 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, xvii.

38 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 1.

Las Vegas, lesson 1: enjoyment

Perhaps the different lessons can be explained by the character of the two places. Had Banham focused on Las Vegas rather than Los Angeles, he may have deduced the same lessons. Banham was not drawn to Las Vegas in the way he was to LA. In *Los Angeles*, he is condescending about Las Vegas, claiming it has become "unashamedly middle-aged," typified by the "boring Beaux-Arts Caesar's Palace...."[39] Given that Caesar's Palace forms a part of Venturi et al.'s original article of 1968 – of which Banham would obviously have been fully aware – this might be interpreted as a lack of sympathy for the Venturi et al. approach in general, and Las Vegas in particular. Indeed, he leaves his *Los Angeles* reader in no doubt that Las Vegas merits little attention compared to LA: "Las Vegas has been as much a marginal gloss on Los Angeles as was Brighton Pavilion on Regency London."[40] Banham had little more to say about Las Vegas in *Los Angeles*, but elsewhere he even finds it has interesting lessons to offer.

In 1975 Banham published an essay entitled "Mediated Environments" that dealt with the ways in which images of American building types and cities had been transmitted through the mass media. After discussing New York and Los Angeles he discusses Las Vegas, a city that only worked in image-form in "the era of Cinemascope and Technicolor."[41] He describes the city as "a classic Pop artifact, as that term had come to be understood by the end of the fifties – an expendable dream that money could just about buy, designed for immediate point-of-sale impact, outside the canons of Fine Art."[42] For his generation, he explained in another essay (1974), Las Vegas was "a self-sufficient phenomenon needing no discussion; all you had to do was point, as one would have done at the Manhattan skyline two decades earlier. However, it was also obviously the biggest ever exhibition of unalloyed Pop-art, on which visiting aesthetes could exercise fancy

39 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 124.

40 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 124.

41 / Banham, Reyner. 1975. "Mediated Environments or: You Can't Build That Here." In Bigsby, C.W.E., editor. *Superculture: American Popular Culture and Europe*. London: Paul Elek, 78.

42 / Bigsby, *Superculture: American Popular Culture and Europe*, 78.

43 / Banham, Reyner. 1974. "Europe and American Design." In Rose, Richard, editor. *Lessons from America: An Exploration*. London: Macmillan, 88.

stylistic discriminations...."[43] Like his response to Los Angeles, the appropriate response to Las Vegas seemed to be to "enjoy" rather than "learn."

Lesson 2: "formlessness and tastelessness"

Banham suggested that a change from enjoying to learning from Las Vegas occurred when Tom Wolfe "upstaged the whole game by pointing out that the designers of the signs were horse-opera characters in string ties who knew nothing of modern art."[44] This change began in the summer of 1965 with the publication of *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby* and, Banham thought, its impact had its greatest force when it was reprinted soon after with an introduction which returned to "the Vegas theme in order to drive home what had become by then Wolfe's main preoccupation – the irrelevance of established fine-art standards of judgment to what was actually happening in America."[45] What made Las Vegas distinctive, Banham wrote in his 1975 essay, was

> ...its formlessness and tastelessness – by the standards of established culture, that is. The scatter along the strip had no discernible plan; the signs were simply commercial art raised to an intense pitch.... Whereas the great image of Manhattan had been of an undesigned but distinct form composed of designed elements of architecture, that of Las Vegas appeared to be an indistinct and undesigned formlessness composed of elements that fell below the threshold of architectural attention.[46]

To have "formlessness and tastelessness" would be a condemnation in conventional critical terms, but it is these very aspects that Banham finds attractive because they "challenge orthodoxies" and provide a "sense of possibilities" that is not based on the predictable or tried-and-tested. Venturi et al. were also sympathetic to sprawl, describing how the Strip by day "is not enclosed and directed as in traditional cities. Rather, it is open and indeterminate, identified by points in space and patterns on the ground...."[47] But they seemed concerned that the Strip in daytime "reads as chaos if you perceive only its forms and exclude its symbolic content."[48] The symbolism may have rescued it from the

44 / Rose, *Lessons from America*, 88.

45 / Banham. "Mediated Environments," 79.

46 / Banham. "Mediated Environments," 78.

47 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 116-117.

48 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 117.

49 / Banham. "Mediated Environments," 79.

chaos for Venturi et al., but for Banham it was an expression, not only of a new, alternative, non-professional aesthetic, but also a freedom: "for anyone who found anything good in the Vegas environment, established procedures of town planning and standards of aesthetic control had to be wrong. The place didn't so much flout those standards – simple opposition would have left the argument with its original polarities – it simply ignored them, which made new polarities necessary."[49] In his 1967 review of Wolfe's book, the nub of his argument was class-related: "what Wolfe had discovered in Las Vegas was the mad money of a relaxed proletariat conjuring up a culture and a visual style that had never been seen anywhere else in the world."[50] Las Vegas' "formlessness" represented an alternative to tastefulness, and an acceptance of it showed you were willing to reject "a culture based on aristocratic taste" and embrace the uncertainty and possibilities of "one based in free-form self-fulfillment...."[51] The reason for a rejection of Las Vegas' formlessness might, ultimately, be political rather than aesthetic, an "elitist suppression by a cultural Establishment."[52] Although other interpretations of the political implications of Las Vegas were in currency,[53] Banham held to his opinion that Las Vegas was a city that expressed not only a new aesthetic but also a democratic social order appropriate to the consumer capitalism of the Second Machine Age.[54]

"Formlessness and tastelessness" bring to mind Venturi et al.'s term "ugly and ordinary" in that both terms require inverted commas. The latter requires them so as to signal that they are making use of conventions which are normally dismissed by professionals as ugly and ordinary as opposed to the more aspirational "heroic and original,"[55] but they are using them in a way that "...[t]hey

50 /
Banham, Reyner. 1967. "Towards a Million-Volt Light and Sound Culture." *Architectural Review*, May, 332.

51 /
Banham, "Towards a Million-Volt Light and Sound Culture," 335.

52 /
Banham. "Europe and American Design," 88.

53 /
A diametrically opposite explanation of the social order was offered in 1972 by Tomás Maldonado, who characterised Las Vegas as a city not created "...*by* the people, *but* for the people. It is the final product... of more than half a century of masked manipulatory violence, directed toward the formation of an apparently free and playful urban environment.... But it is an environment in which men are completely devoid of innovative will and of resistance to the effects of... pseudocommunicative intoxication...." Maldonado. *Desire, Nature, and Revolution*, 65.

54 /
Banham had even acknowledged this aspect of Las Vegas in his *Los Angeles* book in which he commented that "...Los Angeles sums up a general phenomenon of US life; the convulsions in building style that follow when traditional cultural and social restraints have been overthrown and replaced by the preferences of a mobile, affluent, consumer-oriented society.... This process has probably gone further in, say, Las Vegas, yet it is in the context of Los Angeles that everyone seems to feel the strongest compulsion to discuss this fantasticating tendency." Banham. *Los Angeles*, 124.

55 /
Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 93.

are not merely ordinary but represent ordinariness symbolically and stylistically...."[56] Banham's term is also used conventionally to describe Las Vegas and, like Venturi et al., he is turning a term of abuse into a desirable attribute. However, the difference is that Venturi et al. are using "ugly and ordinary" architecture as a source for a sophisticated, high culture architecture–in the same way as a Pop artist uses sources–whereas Banham is not using "formlessness and tastefulness" as a source for high culture, but as an end in itself. The lesson is one of challenging orthodoxies and changing our paradigms of what is visually and politically acceptable and desirable. The application of the lesson of Las Vegas was "Non-Plan," a proposal for the suspension of planning in England to encourage a "plunge into heterogeneity"[57] based on the supposition that "Fremont Street in Las Vegas or Sunset Strip in Beverly Hills represent the living architecture of our age."[58]

56 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 129.

57 / Banham, Reyner, Paul Barker, Peter Hall and Cedric Price. 1969. "Non-Plan: an Experiment in Freedom." *New Society*, March 20, 436.

Lesson 3: virtual architecture

There was one more lesson that Banham had drawn from Las Vegas, and it is a telling one. It was elucidated in *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*, in which he declares:

> What defines the symbolic spaces and places of Las Vegas – the superhotels of The Strip, the casino-belt of Fremont Street – is pure environmental power, manifested as colored light.... [T]he fact remains that the effectiveness with which space is defined is overwhelming, the creation of virtual volumes without apparent structure is endemic, the variety and ingenuity of the lighting techniques is encyclopaedic.... And in a view of architectural education that embraced the complete art of environmental management, a visit to Las Vegas would be as mandatory as a visit to the Baths of Caracalla or La Sainte Chapelle.

Banham seems to be anticipating some of the "virtual" design in our own time but, as far as he was concerned, the "point of studying Las Vegas, ultimately, would be to see an example of how far environmental technology can be driven beyond the confines of architectural practice by designers who (for better or worse) are not inhibited by the traditions of architectonic culture, training and taste."[59]

58 / Banham et al, "Non-Plan: an Experiment in Freedom," 443.

Banham wittily and perceptively defines Las Vegas as representing a "...change from forms assembled in light to light assembled in forms..."[60] – another version of "formlessness," if not "tastelessness." His reference to "colored light" recalls the visionary architecture of Paul Scheerbart and his 1914 book *Glasarchitektur* with its call for "more colored light!"[61] Banham links Scheerbart and Las Vegas directly: the nightscape of the city, he suggests, is an example of what Scheerbart was prophesizing and had "come true in oblique ways he could never have anticipated...."[62] Scheerbart had been one of the prophets rediscovered by Banham in *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, and his stature remained high in *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*. Alongside the Futurist Antonio Sant'Elia, he represents Banham's alternative Modernist who challenged orthodoxies and offered a vision of a technologically-based architecture, underpinned by a keen "mechanical sensibility."[63]

59 / Banham, Reyner. 1969. *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*. London: Architectural Press, 269-70.

60 / Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*, 270. In his 1975 Age of the Masters he was making a similar point: "It may sound strange, almost blasphemous, to say so, but it is in Las Vegas that one comes nearest to seeing gross matter transformed into etherial substance by the power of light." 1975. *Age of the Masters: A Personal View of Modern Architecture*. London: Architectural Press, 62.

61 / Scheerbart, Paul: 1914 (reprinted 1972). *Glasarchitektur*. London: November Books, 72.

62 / Banham. *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*, 128.

63 / See Whiteley, Reyner Banham, chapter 1.

Modernism or Post-Modernism?

However reformist or radical his point of view, Banham never loses faith in Modernism, and this not only sets him apart from Venturi et al., but also explains the different lessons he draws from Los Angeles and Las Vegas. His commitment to the "mechanical sensibility" and the "technological century" led Banham to champion architects such as Buckminster Fuller, Cedric Price and Archigram. He also was a supporter of the megastructure movement and the Brutalist "bloody-mindedness" shown by Alison and Peter Smithson and James Stirling.[64] In *Learning from Las Vegas*, Venturi et al. vehemently attack

The world science futurist metaphysic, the megastructuralist mystique, and the look-Ma-no-buildings environmental suits and pods [which] are a repetition of the mistakes of another generation. Their overdependence on a space-age, futurist, or science-fiction technology parallels the machine aestheticism of the 1920s and approaches its ultimate mannerism. They are, unlike the architecture of the 1920s, artistically a deadend and socially a cop-out.[65]

To Banham, Los Angeles and Las Vegas were in the line of descent of his expanded Modernism, whereas for Venturi et al., Las Vegas could offer that lesson in architectural symbolism and communication that was a break with Modernism's heroism and individualism with its – according to Venturi et al. – misguided, inappropriate and largely implicit symbolism of industrialism.

Banham only ever referred to Venturi et al.'s work and *Learning from Las Vegas* in passing, and never offered a critical assessment of either their ideas or buildings. The closest he came was to position their 1968 essay as "Against the grain of conventional planning wisdom," remarking that Venturi et al. "applauded the profusion of shameless illuminated signs, the total independence of those signs from the architecture of the buildings from urban planning as normally understood."[66] Had that been the sum total of Venturi et al.'s project, Banham would have had no difficulty in giving it his full support but, crucially, he makes no reference to the reason for their study or the chief lesson they drew from it.

That he did not discuss these lessons can be explained by his consistent opposition to Post-Modernism – or at least about what he caricatured as Post-Modernism. The basis of his opposition was that Post-Modernism "exists chiefly as a series of smart graffiti on the bodies of fairly routine modern buildings. It is all outward show and could be removed, in most cases, without destroying the utility of the rather ordinary buildings behind the jesting facades."[67] He intensely disliked what he saw as the "cleverness" shown by Post-Modern architects whom he lists as including Robert Stern, Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves and Venturi who are "liable to make heavy weather and great polemical bother about every historical quote they use." He acknowledged that "It looks terrific on the page, but often tawdry on the site, as does much American Post-Modernism.... But what's it all got to do with 'real architecture'?"[68]

64 / Whitely, Reyner Banham, 249-253.

65 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 149.

66 / Banham, "Mediated Environments," 80.

67 / Banham, Reyner. 1978. "The Writing on the Walls." *Times Literary Supplement*, November 17, 1937.

68 / Banham, Reyner. 1981. "The Ism count." *New Society*, August 27, 362.

69 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 6.

"Real" architecture, presumably, belonged to the Modernist preoccupation with "forms-in-space" which dismissed the Venturi et al. idea of "symbols-in-space" as the sign of a bad lesson. For Venturi et al., "billboards are almost all right."[69] Banham thought they were all right too, in their place, but he probably preferred cathedrals and bicycle sheds.

AUTHOR NOTE

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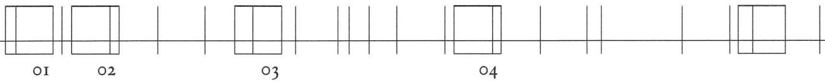
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DELL UPTON

SIGNS TAKEN FOR WONDERS[1]

ABSTRACT

My essay reexamines *Learning from Las Vegas* semiotic presentation of architectural symbolism. First, I argue that the attempt to approach architectural symbols technically, outside their socioeconomic context, overlooks important aspects of signs' functioning. Second, I use visual and verbal metaphors that designers and viewers apply to buildings to suggest that empathetic and embodied meanings are essential to architecture's symbolism. These kinds of meanings were vividly manifested in the "heroic and original" buildings that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour dismiss.

To look back at *Learning from Las Vegas* after thirty years evokes complex reactions. Unlike many other books of similar age, this one has never really left us. Its vigorous defense of architectural ornament, its equation of architecture with communication and its evocative labels "duck" and "decorated shed" all remain current. At the same time, to reduce the book to these familiar elements is to miss much of its richness and complexity. This brief text contains a first-rate study of urban morphology written in the context of mid-twentieth-century discussions of urban community and "imageability," an analysis of the role of ornament and symbolism in architecture and, building on these, a treatise on contemporary design.

1/ I have borrowed my title from Franco Moretti's 1983 book on the sociology of literary forms.

Learning from Las Vegas was a milepost on two divergent roads, one leading to a populist celebration of architecture as it was, the other toward a highly theorized view of architecture as it ought to be. I vividly remember the excitement that greeted its publication (particularly of the widely disseminated, revised paperback edition) among those interested in the everyday landscape. In the climate of the 1970s, the work was welcomed as a telling polemic against cultural hierarchies, an affirmation of popular culture, and a Whitmanian (or Ginsbergian) cel-

ebration of the energy and messiness of American life and landscape. It is still known and read outside architecture on these terms.

Yet while *Learning from Las Vegas* seems to celebrate popular tastes, particularly in its angry defense of the culture of the "silent white majority," its message is not that straightforward. Remember that Las Vegas was only "*almost* all right" (a phrase Robert Venturi first used in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* in the same way he used it in *Learning from Las Vegas*).[2] Venturi and his co-authors Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour never intended to cast aside cultural hierarchies, only to remodel them.[3] Just before the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* was published, Scott Brown took pains to emphasize "the agony in our acceptance of pop," declaring that "we are part of a high art, not a folk or popular art, tradition."[4] In *Learning from Las Vegas* Venturi and his colleagues claimed high-art status through an intricate, even convoluted, polemical game built around outsider and insider positions. They attacked modernists' insider aesthetics by appealing to outsiders' tastes, while their own declared immersion in popular aesthetics positioned them as the true insiders and their modernist targets as clueless outsiders. Thus they seized the high ground of high-art architecture by a surprise attack along the low road, using their pop-culture raw materials skeptically, instrumentally and ironically to define a new path for high art, as the Pop artists whom they admired had done.[5]

The ambivalence at the heart of the book—Scott Brown's "agony"—is encapsulated in the famous categorization of commercial buildings as *ducks*, in which "the architectural systems of space, structure and program are submerged and distorted by the overall symbolic form," or

2 / Venturi, Robert. 1966. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 102. Emphasis added.

3 / *Learning from Las Vegas* has three principal authors, but I will often use Venturi's name as a shorthand term to stand for all three.

4 / Scott Brown, Denise. 1971. "Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton." In *A View from the Campidoglio: Selected Essays, 1953-1984*. Arnell, Peter, Ted Bickford, & Catherine Bergart, editors. New York: Harper & Row, 34, 37.

5 / Venturi, Robert. 1977. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. 2d ed. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 44; Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. 1977. *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* [hereafter cited as LLV]. Rev. ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 100, 105, 130; Scott Brown. "Pop Off," 37; Venturi, Robert. 1978. "A Definition of Architecture as Shelter with Decoration on It, and Another Plea for a Symbolism of the Ordinary in Architecture." In *A View from the Campidoglio*, 63.

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decorated sheds, where "systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them." Ducks, Venturi tells us, were named after the Long Island Duckling, a roadside food stand illustrated in Peter Blake's *God's Own Junkyard.*[6] Many readers remember the book as a celebration of such buildings, which were the improvised, whimsical, one-off products of small businesspeople. However, the large-scale signs of the Las Vegas Strip that the Venturi group studied were not those kinds of buildings, but better-financed, more carefully calculated commercial structures produced by a firm that had been designing and building signs since the 1920s. Thus two aspects of popular culture—the idiosyncratic creations of the self-dramatizing entrepreneur and professionally designed and fabricated corporate advertising—were conflated under the heading of "Pop," as examples of non-elite taste.

6 / LLV, 87.

7 / LLV, 137. Other aspects of LLV are indebted to the discussion of urban form and meaning centered around the work of Kevin Lynch. Scott Brown's early essay "The Meaningful City" is important for understanding the place of LLV in urbanist debates. (Scott Brown, Denise. 1965. "The Meaningful City." *AIA Journal* 43:1, 27-32.)

8 / For example in Alan Colquhoun's essay "Typology and Design Method," which Scott Brown acknowledged several times and which prefigures some of the important arguments about architectural symbolism that find their way into LLV. (Colquhoun, Alan. 1967. "Typology and Design Method." In *Meaning in Architecture.* Jencks, Charles and George Baird, editors. New York: George Braziller, 266-77.)

But *Learning from Las Vegas* is not a study of roadside architecture per se. It was embedded in a particular mid-century architectural discussion, as architects and historians reassessed pre-war modernism. Venturi and his colleagues used the label duck and decorated shed to enter into an attack on "orthodox Modern architecture" that had been going on since the early 1950s.[7] In fact, the first work seriously to confront the modernist assumptions that *Learning from Las Vegas* questioned so acerbically was not found along American commercial strips but in Marseilles, at Chandigarh and at Ronchamp. Le Corbusier's work played a central role as object lesson and case study in the debate to which Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour contributed. It is remarkable how often Ronchamp, in particular, figures, directly or by implication, in the literature that they cite.[8] The Swiss architect hovers over *Learning from Las Vegas*, coming clearly into view only in the brief set piece on the descendants of La Tourette. Yet the chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp haunts the pages of *Learning from*

Las Vegas as a kind of ghostly presence, manifest by implication whenever the "heroic and original" is invoked. As I will suggest later in the essay, our understanding of the implications and limitations of Venturi's particular vision for architecture, which blended 1960s cultural pluralism with ideas borrowed from linguistics and semiotics that were beginning to transform many humanistic disciplines in the 1960s and 1970s, can benefit bringing the visceral architecture of Ronchamp into full view as an alternative to *Learning from Las Vegas*'s sign-saturated polemic. Notre Dame du Haut stands as the quintessential duck next to Venturi's decorated sheds.

The ambivalence about ducks and decorated sheds—the fondness for ducks along the road but their rejection as high architecture—is one of many that structure and fracture *Learning from Las Vegas*. The book is ironic in the technical sense that its narrative repeatedly starts down one path then turns away from it, raises one set of issues, then lays them aside, makes an observation then ignores it.[9] These turnings and turnings back are a sign of the "agony," but also, frankly, an attempt to preempt all possible lines of criticism. Thus the first half of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the study of urban morphology, explores many facets of the experience of the Strip, from signage to light levels to relationships between parking lots and buildings, night and day, interior and exterior, desert heat and air conditioning. The dazzling multiplicity of the city is evident in the large-format first edition, with its plethora of charts, graphs, maps and colored photographs that in some senses mimic the city's sensory profusion. But these are laid aside in the second half, and even suppressed in the monochrome revised edition, with its new subtitle "The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form."[10] After all, "Las Vegas is not the subject of our book... [It is] a treatise on symbolism in architecture."[11]

Still, Las Vegas refuses to go away, for although Venturi began to develop the theoretical ideas put forth in *Learning from Las Vegas* and in many other venues years

9 / de Man, Paul. 1996. "The Concept of Irony." In *Aesthetic Ideology*. Warminski, Andrzej, editor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 178-82. Thanks to Aron Vinegar for directing me to this essay.

10 / I am indebted to Michael Golec for this insight.

11 / Scott Brown, Denise. 1977. "Preface to the Revised Edition." LLV, xv.

before the Las Vegas studio, the choice of the Strip as a laboratory colored the argument in critical ways, as Karsten Harries has observed.[12] According to Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, modernist architects deny architecture's symbolic function while seeking meaning in an unacknowledged way, through their "heroic and original" expressivist massing. But such abstract architecture is barren because it rejects architecture's rich heritage of symbolically charged conventional forms (meaning applied visual elements) that tap into deeply rooted social and cultural references and associations.[13]

To the modernists' strained efforts to achieve individual expression through dramatic massing, Las Vegas offers the counterexample of a legible architecture that works through the familiar and the obvious. The Strip is a commercial landscape. Its big signs strive, in Venturi's words, for "bold communication rather than... subtle expression."[14] In fact, the entire Strip is "an architecture of communication over space."[15] Venturi refined this statement a few pages later, describing the Strip as "symbol in space rather than form in space."[16]

While the Las Vegas of Part I was a dizzying cacophony of messages competing for the driver's attention, it was not chaotic. Rather, it was a "difficult" multiple order, unlike the oversimplified, single order of the modernist city. Individual parts might clash, but they all worked according to some fairly straightforward principles. So the Strip (and their own agenda) seduced Venturi and his colleagues and students into thinking that, like a sign, architecture has a relatively clear message to convey, one that can be transmitted most easily and most cheaply by words on signs rather than by "deformed" buildings—by a sign proclaiming "I AM A MONUMENT" standing on an ordinary building rather than by a monumental or heroic and original building.[17] Architecture is text.

The passing years have turned what might originally have been a strategic observation

12 / Harries, Karsten. 1997. *The Ethical Function of Architecture.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 78, 81.

13 / LLV, 7, 101. The claim of impoverishment derives from Ernst Gombrich by way of Alan Colquhoun. (Colquhoun. "Typology and Design Method," 274.)

14 / LLV, 9.

15 / LLV, 8.

16 / LLV, 13.

17 / LLV, 149.

18 / Venturi, Robert. 1996. *Iconography and Electronics upon a Generic Architecture: A View from the Drafting Room.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 55, 13.

into a central conviction. Venturi now calls for "a generic architecture of surface" whose "electronic surfaces can be defined as sources of light... acknowledging a 24-hour architecture of now."[18] After thirty years of claiming that Las Vegas was merely a formal case study, Venturi now envisions it as our permanent condition. Architecture is television.

Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour modified their initial, overly simple description of architectural symbolism in the course of the famous comparison of their firm's Guild House with Paul Rudolph's Crawford Manor. There they parsed architecture's communicative properties in now-familiar terms borrowed from semiotics, stressing the paired qualities of denotation, which "indicates specific meaning" (such as the casino sign's fundamental message, "Stop here" or "Spend your money here") and connotation, which "suggests general meanings" that are embedded in the forms of the signs.[19] These general meanings are "associative," based on past experience and social consensus, and set the social tone of the actions to be held under its banner or the context in which the primary message is to be understood. Architecture is language.

19 / LLV, 100-1.

20 / Harries, *Ethical Function*, 70, 78. Harries makes a similar point in arguing that Venturi mentions the role of architecture in the "articulation of space" but not in setting the tone for social action. (Harries, *Ethical Function*, 81.)

While it might seem odd at first glance that the prophets of complexity and contradiction should reduce architecture to such a straightforward communicative function—to what Harries calls "literary architecture" or "architecture as text"—it appears less strange if we understand that much of their celebration of complexity is devoted to architecture's visual qualities, or what used to be called formal analysis, and not to its signification.[20] In this respect *Complexity and Contradiction* is more complex and contradictory than *Learning from Las Vegas*, where the communicative or "symbolic" function of architecture is treated as a relatively simple matter.

Was the 1960s Strip a purely visual, message-conveying environment? Is architecture a text? What message did it convey? In what manner? Is architecture a language? The emphasis on "conventional" decoration throughout

Learning from Las Vegas as well as the choice of an explicitly commercial setting as a laboratory allow the reader to overlook these questions, since the answers seem so obvious. For a work subtitled *The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, *Learning from Las Vegas* offers remarkably little analysis of "symbolism" or of the ways "form" symbolizes. The semiotic theories to which it alludes assume that signs are arbitrary and conventional vehicles for communicating "meaning."[21] Meaning floats free of any particular relationship to objects, denoting and connoting whatever we agree that it will. So conventional meanings only become conventional in a social setting and they only "mean" when employed in other social settings. This inherently social quality of signs makes it difficult to sustain the asocial, purely technical analysis of signs or symbols that the authors vehemently insist on undertaking.

21 / These assumptions are founded in the work of Fernand de Saussure. For a discussion of their impact on the plastic and visual arts, see Elkins, James. 1999. *The Domain of Images.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 55; Summers, David. 1991. "Conditions and Conventions: On the Disanalogy of Art and Language." In *The Language of Art History.* Kemal, Salim and Ivan Gaskell, editors. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 185-90, 194-96.

22 / LLV, 53.

23 / Lefebvre, Henri. 1984. *Everyday Life in the Modern World.* New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 90; Upton, Dell. 1998. *Architecture in the United States.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 33-35, which builds on Campbell, Colin. 1987. *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumption.* Oxford: Blackwell; and Miller, Daniel. 1987. *Material Culture and Mass Consumption.* Oxford: Blackwell.

As so often in this work, though, insights that are mentioned but not pursued offer the possibility of other views of architecture's symbolic functions. In one such passage, Venturi remarks that

> The Strip shows the value of symbolism and allusion in an architecture of vast space and speed and proves that people, even architects, have fun with architecture that reminds them of something else, perhaps of harems or the Wild West in Las Vegas, perhaps of the nation's New England forebears in New Jersey.[22]

The Las Vegas that Venturi and his co-authors describe so eloquently and accurately "reminds [visitors] of something else," offering, then drawing back, the possibility that one might visit harems, the Wild West or the palaces of the Caesars. Here they allude to a fundamental process of modern life, the creation of consumer desire. Feeling a void that cannot be described, we seek an intangible palliative that cannot exist, but settle for a tangible surrogate that *can* be bought. With each new acquisition, the intangible takes another step back and another purchase is necessary.[23]

This view of the signs is very different from the relatively monodirectional communication process that *Learning from Las Vegas* so often presents as it addresses the architects who must create decorated sheds. Here, "subtle expression" – even tact and delicacy – rather than "bold communication" is essential. The link between the desired but intangible – a new identity as the cure for one's felt inadequacy – and the tangible but available – a new setting or new possessions – must be implied rather than stated. Consumers are too sophisticated to believe that a real harem, Virginia City saloon or Roman triclinium lie behind the casino's doors. They understand that no such direct exchange is possible. The ironic disruptions – the continual oscillation of the discourse from intangible to tangible, from fantasy to transaction – make it possible for the game to continue. Its terms are conveyed by the physical and visual qualities of Las Vegas' signs: their distortions of scale, "improper" use of classical detail and contextual discord tell us that Caesar's Palace is *and* is not Caesar's palace.[24]

24 / Arthur C. Danto has commented on Las Vegas's dazzling layers of authenticity and inauthenticity. (Danto, Arthur C. 2001. "Degas in Vegas." In *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in Pluralistic Art World.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 351-59.)

The art historian David Summers labels this process of being/not being *substitution*, a game in which all the players agree that the thing at hand will stand for a desired but absent object.[25] The substitute – the Strip's classical portico or miniature Eiffel Tower – is useful only to the extent that it is manifestly not that for which it stands. The difference between original and substitute cues our understanding of the present situation in a way that is even richer than if the original itself were present.[26] In this kind of "communication," interpretation is at least as important as initial assertion. "Symbolism" is transaction rather than representation, and a sign reading "I am a monument" does not necessarily communicate any less ambiguously than a heroic and original building.

25 / Summers, David. 1991. "Real Metaphor: Towards a Redefinition of the 'Conceptual' Image." *In Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation.* Bryson, Norman, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey, editors. New York: HarperCollins, 241, 243, 245.

26 / Summers, "Conditions and Conventions," 204-5; italics in the original.

Is an architectural theory that takes the signs of the Strip as models satisfactory, then? If the kind of applied symbolism exemplified by signs and decorated sheds creates

the most accessible kind of architecture and best represents the taste of the "silent white majority," why is it that ducks appear to capture the popular imagination?[27] Tellingly, the recent transformation and taming of the Strip, now renamed Las Vegas Boulevard, deemphasized pure signs in favor of miniature Eiffel Towers, overblown Sphinxes, glass Pyramids and compressed Grand Canals—corporate reinterpretations of roadside ducks—as Venturi and Scott Brown themselves observed in a perceptive essay that chronicled a return visit to Las Vegas in the 1990s.[28]

27 / LLV, 153; Scott Brown, Denise. 1971. "Learning from Pop." In *A View from the Campidoglio*, 26-27; Scott Brown. "Pop Off," 35.

28 / Venturi, Robert and Denise Scott Brown. 1996. "Las Vegas after Its Classic Age." In *Iconography and Electronics*, 126. Something like the classic Venturian Strip survives in Las Vegas along the Boulder Strip, now a down-scale residential and commercial district for Latino workers.

The reworking of the Strip demands a reexamination of the claims set out in *Learning from Las Vegas*. Does an "architecture of meaning" always include a message?[29] And is architecture's significance so easily divorced from its materiality? The duck says, "No!"

Here we might turn back to the heroic and original modernist architecture that *Learning from Las Vegas* denounces. Recall that the authors dismiss "orthodox Modern architecture" as lacking in content, as a result of its overly personal formal vocabulary. Let us start with the very dramatic example of such heroic and original architecture: Le Corbusier's Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut (1951-53) at Ronchamp, France.

Le Corbusier was severely chastised for his challenge to Modernist orthodoxy two decades before *Learning from Las Vegas* appeared. The architect James Stirling famously saw the chapel as a symptom of "the crisis of rationalism," while the critic Giulio Argan and the architect Ernesto Rogers debated whether Le Corbusier was attempting to "go 'beyond the rational'" or to plunge directly into the irrational at Ronchamp.[30] The renowned historian Nikolaus Pevsner labeled Ronchamp as "the most discussed monument of the new irrationalism" and bitterly denounced Le Corbusier's "revolt from reason" for the "mid-century irresponsibility" and frivolity evident in architecture such as that of the Brazilian mod-

29 / Venturi, Robert and Denise Scott Brown. 1969. "Learning from Lutyens: Reply to Alison and Peter Smithson." In *A View from the Campidoglio*, 20.

30 / Stirling, James. 1956. "Ronchamp: Le Corbusier's Chapel and the Crisis of Rationalism." *Architectural Review* 119, 160-61; Tzonis, Alexander. 2001. *Le Corbusier: The Poetics of Machine and Metaphor*. New York: Universe, 176.

ernist Oscar Niemeyer.[31] Yet in their polemic, Venturi and his colleagues conflate the kind of rationalist functionalism that Stirling defended and Colquhoun criticized with its expressivist antithesis at Ronchamp. Together they were the "heroic and original" "orthodox Modern architecture," with its paucity of conventional imagery or "symbolism" that Venturi set out to demolish.

31 / Pevsner, Nikolaus. 1970. *An Outline of European Architecture.* 7th ed., rev. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 426-29.

The testimony of its architect and of critics and visitors, however, casts Notre Dame du Haut in a very different light. Le Corbusier and his assistants reported that they envisioned the roof as a crab shell, a boat, a ski jump, a water sluice and an aircraft wing.[32] Based on this testimony, Danièle Pauly depicted Le Corbusier's design process as one that dredged these images from conscious and unconscious memory and worked them into sculptural, architectural form—into an "architectural symphony."[33] Far from being irrational or lacking "content" in its abstraction, Notre Dame du Haut overflows with concrete, everyday images. These have nothing obvious to do with the function or denotative meanings of the building, but were ways for Le Corbusier and his staff to think from their experience in the world to the project at hand.[34]

32 / Tzonis. Le Corbusier, 181; Curtis, William J. R. 1986. *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms.* New York: Phaidon, 179-80; Evans, Robin. 1995. *The Projective Cast: Architecture and Its Three Geometries.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 305.

33 / Pauly, Danièle. 1987. "The Chapel of Ronchamp as an Example of Le Corbusier's Creative Process." In *Le Corbusier.* Brooks, H. Allen, editor. Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 132-34; Pauly, Danièle. 1997. *Le Corbusier: La Chapelle de Ronchamp / The Chapel at Ronchamp.* Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier; Basel: Birkhäuser, 122 (quote).

The contemporary architect Frank Gehry describes his working method in similar terms. Gehry, who is known for creating dramatic sculptural buildings that would certainly earn them Venturi's label "heroic and original," says that he begins by "looking for the image" through sketching and that he frequently works from everyday objects such as bottles, snakes, fish, boats and horses' heads.[35] Even in the Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao, Spain, a work comparable in expressivist abstraction to the chapel at Ronchamp, the architect and his assistants described elements of the design as "bootlike," and "sail-like." One corner was a "ship's bow," while the crowning element was the "flower."[36]

34 / They may also have had a connotative function in that by naming the images Le Corbusier and his assistants established the modern context in which they wanted this religious structure to be understood.

35 / Lindsey, Bruce. 2001. *Digital Gehry: Material Resistance / Digital Construction.* Basel: Birkhäuser, 7, 23, 82; van Bruggen, Coosje. 1999. *Frank O. Gehry. Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.* New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 40, 42.

In both cases, of course, the concrete images were thoroughly transformed, even dissolved, in the course of the design process when they were subjected to the distinctly unsymbolic operations necessary to create usable, buildable structures. Gehry's poetic and metaphoric images become standing buildings thanks to sophisticated computers and their expert programmers.[37] Similarly, Robin Evans detailed the particular contribution of the engineering-drawing technique of ruled surfaces to the development of the final design of Le Corbusier's chapel.[38] The results were not ducks in the roadside sense, whatever their starting points. Nevertheless, whether or not the architects' accounts of their design processes are "true" or complete, their resort to such visual images is significant. The architects "see" a variety of ordinary objects even in the most abstract buildings.

36 / Van Bruggen, *Frank O. Gehry*, 36, 52.

37 / Lindsey, *Digital Gehry*, 48-89.

38 / Evans, *Projective Cast*, 293, 306-8.

Just as architects may begin with iconic images, viewers often seek such images in an unfamiliar building, although they may or may not see the same images that its architects cite. The aesthetician John Alford, an early analyst of Ronchamp, explicitly acknowledged his search for such icons: "In order to make the building and its aesthetic more intelligible to myself I found myself looking for analogies with other monuments, architectural or sculptural." He thought Ronchamp's resemblance to a Neolithic dolmen tomb and to a ship particularly compelling, but assumed that these were part of Le Corbusier's intent—to fuse a "symbolic fortress and tomb" with the "Ship of Life or of the Soul."[39] This would make them connotative symbols in the Venturian sense. Most visitors are less driven to find theological messages in Ronchamp's appearance. They have compared the chapel's towers to thumbs, pots, "an industrialized farm silo or a nautical vent duct," and the whole building to "men holding up a boat," Noah's Ark, "'bits of broken china thrown on top of the hill,'" a dove, a sitting duck, a monk's hood, a nun's cowl, praying hands and, as Alford did, a ship.[40] Some of these connote

39 / Alford, John. 1958. "Creativity and Intelligibility in Le Corbusier's Chapel at Ronchamp." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16:3, 302-4.

40 / Stirling. "Ronchamp," 155; Tzonis. *Le Corbusier*, 181; Evans, *Projective Cast*, 305-6, 317 (quotes); Jencks, Charles. 1973. *Le Corbusier and the Tragic View of Architecture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 152.

modernity or function, but others (the sitting duck, the china) are metaphors of absurdity or of absent meaning.

In the light of such analogies, we may take issue with Venturi's claim that "Allusion and comment, on the past or present or on our great commonplaces or old clichés, and inclusion of the *everyday* in the environment, sacred and profane . . . are lacking in present-day Modern architecture."[41] Architects and viewers do find such allusions in modern buildings, but they rarely see them (*pace* Alford) as denotative statements and not always as connotative ones. So we might ask, particularly of the meaningless images, whether they have "symbolic content," even if they do not communicate Venturian messages.

41 / LLV, 53.

One way to think about this question would be to turn from the sober world of high architecture at Ronchamp and Bilbao to the light-hearted and irreverent landscape defined by the nicknames that lay people give to specific buildings. These constitute a kind of visual-verbal play that ranges through a wide variety of buildings of many ages and many types. For the most part, this play is free of the pervasive publicity and journalistic canonization that colors our reactions to instant monuments such as Ronchamp or Bilbao.[42]

Of a highly unscientific sample of almost 200 such names, two thirds pun or otherwise play on the physical aspects of the building.[43] They append a concrete visual image such as those we have encountered at Ronchamp and Bilbao to a building's abstract architectural form, metaphorically moving the nicknamed building into a new context, often to the building's disadvantage.[44] The greatest number of nicknames compared a building to another object, almost always a smaller, more mundane object, based on the shape, color or materials of the structure. Thus the shape of the office building at 885 Third Avenue in New York prompted the nickname Lipstick Building. It is complemented by the

42 / For example, Muschamp, Herbert. 1997. "The Miracle at Bilbao." *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 7, 56-59, 72, 82.

43 / Most of these nicknames were collected by way of a call for contributions on the e-lists of the Consortium of Art and Architectural Historians and the Society of Architectural Historians for contributions. The project garnered 185 different nicknames (discounting minor variations) for 143 different nineteenth- and twentieth-century European, North and South American and Australian buildings. Others were collected through personal encounters, verbal reports from acquaintances and library and Internet research. Interestingly, there were no African buildings and only a few Asian ones submitted. Slightly fewer than one third of the nicknames were based on word play, meaning that they punned or otherwise manipulated the name of the building or building owner or the function of the building, as in "the Orifice" for The Oracle shopping mall in Reading, England.

44 / Seventy of the nicknames were *clearly* derogatory (many others probably were) while only two were clearly admiring.

Lipstick and Compact Case (or Lipstick and Powder Puff), the 1961 additions to the ruined Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedachtsnis-Kirche in Berlin. The Fernsehturm, a broadcasting tower in Berlin is Tele-spargel (Tele-asparagus) or the Toothpick. A housing project in Sydney and Jerome L. Greene Hall at Columbia University in New York are both known as the Toaster. A roof that looks like a partly opened shell earned the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin the label Schwangere Auster (Pregnant Oyster). The Monument to Vittorio Emmanuele II in Rome is variously known as the Torta Nunziale (Wedding Cake), Macchina da Scrivere (Typewriter), and the Dentures. Montreal's Olympic Stadium is the Giant Toilet Bowl, while Norman Foster's new Swiss Re Tower in London, not yet finished, is already called the Erotic Gherkin.

The most striking nicknames compare buildings to ordinary household appliances (St. Mary Maytag, the Lemon Squeezer, the Washing Machine, the Blender)[45] or to foods (Tortenstück/the Slice of Cake, the Corncobs, the Golden Cabbage, the Durian, the Space Strudel).[46] All of these names reimagine monumental buildings as everyday items that are normally used or consumed by people. They transform the human-architectural scale relationship into a distorted human-object relationship.

45 /
For St. Mary's Cathedral, San Francisco; St. Engelbert's Church, Cologne; the Calakmul Building, Mexico City; and the Mexicana Airlines Tower, Mexico City, respectively.

Human scale is evoked even more directly when nicknames compare buildings to human beings or parts of human beings. The tall antennae atop the BellSouth Building in Nashville distinguish the Batman Building. The linked, distorted towers of Gehry's Nationale-Nederlanden Building in Prague are thought to resemble Fred Astaire clutching Ginger Rogers, hence the Ginger and Fred Building. Der lange Eugen, a nickname for a twenty-nine-story Parliamentary Office Building in Bonn, refers to Eugen Gerenmaier, the president of the Bundestag at the time the building was constructed, and a man of short stature. Bowman's Erection for the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, the Prick on the Plains for Bertram

46 /
For the Museum of Modern Art, Frankfurt; Marina City, Chicago; the Secession Building, Vienna; the Esplanade-Theaters on the Bay, Singapore; and the Austrian Cultural Forum, New York, respectively.

Goodhue's Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln, Hoover's Last Erection for the Hoover Tower at Stanford University and the Gentalia for the juxtaposition of the Sky Dome and the CN Tower in Toronto all use phallic metaphors to comment on the ambitions of architects and patrons.[47]

Building nicknames recontextualize through substitution. While Le Corbusier and Gehry subordinated images to the final product, viewers of those buildings projected their own images onto them to understand and "tame" (or dismiss) these idiosyncratic buildings. Nicknames aim to destabilize architecture by what seventeenth-century English poets called a metaphysical conceit (or image), one that links two unlikely things in a way that casts at least one of them into an unexpected light. As one informant wrote of two particularly striking nicknames, "Now try ridding your mind" of them when viewing the buildings.[48]

47 / John G. Bowman was the University of Pittsburgh chancellor who promoted the construction of the Cathedral of Learning. Surprisingly few nicknames employ sexual innuendoes as these do.

Architectural nicknaming is a metaphorical gesture that is grounded in architecture's materiality, specificity and place-rootedness. Building on the Greek root of "metaphor," which means to transfer something from one place to another, David Summers has stressed the relationality and spatiality inherent in visual (including architectural) metaphors. They are "real metaphors" whose significance derives from substitutions within the realm of mass and extension that we occupy and, just as importantly, from the context within which substitution is made. In his words, "Substitutes are effective in the space in which they are put because they are only 'real' in that space...we cannot interpret them without giving equal attention to their correlative spaces."[49] Summers's real metaphors are serious and sincere while building nicknames are playful and ironic. His substitutions turn pumpkins into coaches, but building nicknames turn coaches into pumpkins.

48 / Benjamin Harvey, personal communication, Aug. 22, 2002.

49 / Summers, "Real Metaphor," 245-46; Summers, "Conditions and Conventions," 184.

Architectural nicknames are irreverent but rarely angry or demeaning. Even the many that are disparaging

usually have a good-humored tone about them. Their playfully subversive substitution of images carries us back to the roadside ducks that *Learning from Las Vegas* named so memorably and that the authors equated with heroic and original architecture. A duck is a building intentionally shaped like another object or group of objects: no imaginative projection is necessary. Most often the image represents a mundane object of daily use—a clam box, a milk bottle, a coffee pot, a miner's hat, an automobile tire—or an object of literal consumption—a chicken, an artichoke, a hot dog, a donut. Occasionally the building resembles a human being. In other words, ducks are explicit representations of the same kinds of objects that the nicknames project onto non-iconic buildings.

50 / See Marling, Karal Ann. 1984. *The Colossus of Roads: Myth and Symbol along the American Highway.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Ducks, inhabitable sculptures, are one subcategory of the large body of colossi (and miniatures), ranging from civic monuments to roadside attractions, that populate the landscape.[50] In civic monuments, this scale shift often has a connotative intent. The adjacent Jefferson and Franklin D. Roosevelt memorials in Washington, D.C., are a case in point. The colossal statue of Jefferson, raised on a high pedestal, and the near-life-size, pedestal-less figures of FDR imply very different relationships between the great men and ordinary viewers. A roadside duck is intended to attract motorists' attention and to suggest the goods and services offered, but presumably not to imply that humans are mere pipsqueaks compared to domesticated fowl. Yet in the cases of both the memorials and the commercial structures, the viewer is invited to experience the dislocation and disorientation that arises from finding oneself, like Alice in Wonderland, in an unfamiliar relationship to familiar things. Building nicknames offer the same defamiliarization, suggesting that the city itself has become a kind of funhouse (which is not necessarily a bad thing).

The incorporation of concrete images into the processes of designing and experiencing Le Corbusier's and Gehry's buildings, the nicknaming of a Batman Building or a Durian and a roadside entrepreneur's construction

of a giant duck or donut are linked as playful exercises that manipulate the relationship between self and environment symbolically. In some cases Venturian communication enters into the process. When Alford reads theological content into Ronchamp, both connotative and denotative messages are invoked. And architectural nicknames surely connote one's attitude toward a particular structure.

In framing architectural symbolism under the rubric of language, however, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour are among those who, argues Pierre Bourdieu, fall so thoroughly under the spell of the language they use that they would reduce all cultural acts to propositions and messages. "Language spontaneously becomes the accomplice of this hermeneutic philosophy which leads one to conceive action as something to be deciphered, when it leads one to say, for example, that a gesture or ritual *expresses* something, rather than saying quite simply, that it is 'sensible' (*sensé*) or, as in English, that it 'makes' sense."[51] For Bourdieu, there is a sense of "rightness," of being in tune, involved in such actions that is partly somatic and that cannot be reduced to a denotative or connotative proposition.

51 / Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice.* Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 36-37.

Instead, it might be more appropriate to cast language into the realm of architecture, of the material, of what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call "embodied realism." According to Lakoff and Johnson, we succeed in the world by sorting things into categories, simplifying differences and lumping our experience as much as possible into "basic-level categories," a kind of categorical least-common-denominator. They go on to argue that as the products of embodied minds actively and corporeally engaged in our surroundings, most of our basic-level categories are based on comparisons with and relationships to our bodies. Our figurative speech is rich with metaphors founded in these body-based, relational categories.[52]

52 / Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought.* New York: Basic Books, 17-18, 27, 30-38.

An important aspect of architectural symbolism, then, lies in the metaphorical relationships that it proposes between bodies and buildings. Metaphor, wrote Donald

Davidson, is the "dreamwork of language..."[53] It has no hidden or other meaning—no message outside itself to which it points, no content that can be paraphrased.[54] The mundane iconic images and correspondences architects and viewers employed at Ronchamp and Bilbao were strategies for fitting these "abstract" modern buildings into their own embodied frames of reference. They symbolized the buildings' relationships to the world as builders and viewers imagine it, a test that took the form of Summers's metaphorical substitution.

53 / Davidson, Donald. 1978. "What Metaphors Mean." In *On Metaphor.* Sacks, Sheldon, editor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 29.

54 / Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," 43. Noël Carroll makes the same point with respect to visual metaphors. (Carroll, Noël. 2001. "Visual Metaphor." In *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 355, 365.)

The anthropologist Dan Sperber, writing at about the time *Learning from Las Vegas* was published, denied that symbolism is "the semiotic minus language." "Symbols are not signs. They are not paired with their interpretations in a code structure. Their interpretations are not meanings." The meaning of symbols is "absent meaning." Instead, symbolism represents knowledge about knowledge. It is a way of affirming what we think we know about what we know. That is, the power of symbolism lay not in its transmission of a message, but in its ritual, visual or verbal enactment of relationships that we believe to be true, what is "right" or "makes sense," in Bourdieu's phrasing.[55]

55 / Sperber, Dan. 1975. *Rethinking Symbolism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1, 51-85 (quote).

It is not necessary, then, to discard language when we argue that architecture is neither a language nor a text. We simply need to acknowledge that even our verbal encounters with architecture depend on our fundamental, embodied engagement with our material surroundings, an engagement based not simply on looking at signs but on immersion in a multi-dimensional landscape.[56]

56 / On the verbal component of visual metaphors, see Carroll, "Visual Metaphor," 359.

So space cannot be discounted as easily as Venturi and his colleagues do. Even the automobile traveler along the Las Vegas Strip of thirty years ago was immersed in a large-scaled, changing environment in which his or her relationship to objects constantly shifted as signs loomed

and streamed by, one after the other.[57] Venturi's term "automobile scale" obscures the fact that such giant signs and giant architectural objects were part of the world long before the automobile came onto the scene because they were toys in a more important and more pervasive game than selling, one that *symbolizes* human being in the world.[58] This is why ducks are so popular and it may be why they are replacing decorated sheds in modern Las Vegas, as corporate-sponsored architects strive to emulate the kind of visual and spatial play that freelance roadside merchants engaged in so fluently seventy years ago.

57 / It seems to me that, as they so often do, Venturi and his colleagues acknowledge this in part I of LLV and ignore it in part II.

58 / Henkin, David. 1998. *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York.* New York: Columbia University Press, explores the ways in which antebellum New York was a city inscribed with texts at all scales, while Rubin, Barbara. 1979. "Aesthetic Ideology and Urban Design." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69, 339-61, discusses ducks before the automobile.

Learning from Las Vegas is a monument in the history and theory of American architecture, but it is also a sign marking a curious turning point for the field. The expressive buildings produced by architects such as Le Corbusier, Niemeyer, Rudolph and Eero Saarinen in the 1950s and 1960s explored the embodied relationships between people and their environments, their dramatic gestural forms eliciting a kind of somatic empathy from the viewer. In rejecting this kind of heroic and original architecture (for some very good reasons) and in using the results of their own field research so selectively, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour set architecture on a road away from the material toward the cerebral. *Learning from Las Vegas*, along with *Complexity and Contradiction* (both issued in revised editions in 1977), inaugurated the period of high theory in architecture. *Complexity and Contradiction*'s reliance on modes of literary criticism and the communications model employed in *Learning from Las Vegas* were instrumental in delivering American architectural theory into the linguistic bondage from which it has yet to be liberated. Although Venturi and Scott Brown dislike being connected with their postmodern successors, the arbitrariness of "conventional" form that they championed undeniably opened the door for an architecture in which

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a billboard proclaiming "I am a monument" attached to a box could be perfectly acceptable, and they opened another door to the wordiness and immateriality of contemporary theory. Since the 1960s, exploration of architecture's materiality has been left to artists such as Dan Flavin, Gordon Matta-Clark, Dan Graham and Rachel Whiteread.

To reconsider *Learning from Las Vegas* through the lens of the architecture that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour rejected is not to call for a return to the heroic and original or to ignore the (unspecified) constraints that they claim make such an architecture impractical or inappropriate to our times. Rather, it is to turn the authors' call to learn from the entire landscape back on them. The lesson of the heroic modernists, the smart-aleck building namers and the duck-builders is that architectural meaning encompasses more than a one-way process of "communicating" and "symbolizing." Architecture is not language. Architecture is not a text. Architecture is not television.

Thanks to Paul Groth, Karen Kevorkian, Zeynep Kezer and especially the editors, Michael Golec and Aron Vinegar, for comments on an earlier version of this essay.

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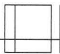
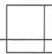
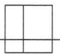
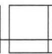
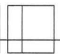

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