“The Significance of A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas”

from Learning from Las Vegas (1972)

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown

Editors’ Introduction

This early version of Learning from Las Vegas has become a classic of postmodern design theory. The essay inflamed the design cognoscenti of the time with their assertions that the urbanism of the Vegas Strip should be valued for its richness of communication, its representation of everyday consumer values, and its example as a truly representative American urbanism (more so than the top-down minimalist urbanism and architecture that was under critical fire at that time). Written in the early 1970s, and later revised as a larger book with colleague Steven Izenour, Venturi and Scott Brown assert that the semiotic truthfulness of Las Vegas is implicitly American – its signage, decorated casinos, and entertainment-oriented design. The American urban arterial, as illustrated through the example of Las Vegas, is as notable for its lack of pedigree as it is for its consumer/vehicle functionalism. With a good degree of dry humor in considering this street phenomenon on par with traditional urbanism, Venturi and Scott Brown forced the design community to address their disconnect with the way in which the American city was being built. As part of their strategy, they suggest that the spaces of Las Vegas are comparable to both a Roman piazza (with respect to the enclosure qualities of the Strip itself), and the landscape of Versailles (with respect to the ubiquitous A&P parking lot). While their assertions often sound both ridiculous and grandiose, particularly for those who value the usual suspects of urban design worship (the well-enclosed plaza, the boulevard, the pedestrian qualities of compact villages), Learning from Las Vegas has become more pertinent as time has passed.

Learning from Las Vegas received both supportive and highly critical reviews. Progressives enjoyed the indictment of elite designers. High profile design was perceived to have lost its ability to communicate and find value with the general public. Modern architecture and urban design were seen as dull and monotonous, life-sucking of their cities, and far less successful as large scale sculpture. The design establishment, however, saw this as a direct attack on their very beings (which was intended); similar in spirit to Jane Jacobs’ attack on the planning establishment in the introduction to Death and Life of Great American Cities. Diatribes against Learning from Las Vegas soon followed. Of note is a particularly rancorous 1971 debate with the architectural historian and theorist Kenneth Frampton, in which Denise Scott Brown defends both popular tastes as expressed in everyday places, “consumer folk culture,” and the text of her article Learning from Pop (which predates Learning from Las Vegas). Frampton speaks on behalf of a more elite design sensibility, with architects (who at this time were also functioning as urban designers), having the intellectual capacity and societal role of producing projects that could both uplift the masses and restore the built environment in the face of consumer kitsch. Interestingly, Frampton is also critical of other picturesque “towNScape” theorists, such as Gordon Cullen and Kevin Lynch (both in this volume). Frampton’s aspirations for the design professions seem noble but overly idealized given the great amount of placelessness forming in cities around the world.
The effect of Venturi and Scott Brown’s polemic on willing adherents was design that often failed to meet the tests of criticism or lasting value (many have made similar assertions with regard to New Urbanist projects). Early postmodern designers sought an architecture and urbanism that would communicate to the general public through its visual referents – which Venturi and Scott Brown describe as Ducks (buildings that are shaped as direct representations of their function) and Decorated Sheds (buildings that communicate directly through applied text and signage). And so we see in the first years of postmodern urbanism and architecture an overt desire to connect meaning to design; often with results that haven’t aged well; for example, Charles Moore’s Piazza d’Italia in New Orleans, the Portland, Oregon municipal building by Michael Graves, Phillip Johnson’s Chippendale highboy atop the AT&T tower in New York City. These attempts at re-communicating the meaning of architecture and urbanism were later derided for their shallowness, camp and irony, disconnect from context, and lack of gravitas – which light-heartedness often evokes. A second phase of postmodern urbanism arose in response, valuing context, place-based design, critical regionalism, and more locally authentic meanings.

In their thesis, Venturi and Scott Brown acknowledge that their text shouldn’t be understood as a prescription for making cities; they even imply that the architecture of the Strip might be the worst outcomes of the design professions at that time; and interestingly, the problematic of the urban arterial continues to this day as one of the great unsolved aspirations of contemporary redevelopment. Their analogies to European urbanism don’t address qualitative differences between the commercial highway or parking lot and these traditional places, subsequently leaving some designers to ponder how to translate the lessons they learned in Las Vegas. Making this even more difficult, especially to those uninitiated to archi-speak, the text is filled with jargon and insider terminology. Yet despite the criticism and lack of direction, over time the text has evolved in meaning and become a clarion call to designers to get real in approaching development process, reducing idealistic expectations, and coming to terms with the culture of the American urban landscape – despite its low-brow character. The widespread re-appreciation of the writing reminds us of these place and context lessons. In addition to its re-appreciation, it is also recognized as having seeded many new theories that would emanate later in the century, including Rem Koolhaas’ recognition of the “Generic City” as a type of Post-Urbanism, Crawford and Kaliski’s “Everyday Urbanism,” and much of the place-based design strategies valued by planners, designers, and the public today.

Robert Venturi and his wife/professional partner Denise Scott Brown are architects, theorists, urbanists, and educators living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Their writings and theories were developed from courses, lectures, and professional work. They’ve had significant impact on the way designers consider everyday environments and how design intentions are communicated. Their interests in design expression deal with the semiotic nature of design communication and how both buildings and urban design projects speak to viewers both directly through text, but also symbolically through design referents. Venturi is widely known for the phrase “less is a bore,” a postmodern play on Mies van der Rohe’s maxim “less is more.” He was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 1991 for his life contributions to the field of architecture; and together they won the Vincent J. Scully Prize in 2003 from the US National Building Museum.


Steven Izenour (1940–2001) was also an architect, urbanist, and theorist; and became a co-author on Learning from Las Vegas. He worked as a Principal at Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates for many years,
collaborating on many writing and design projects. He taught at UPenn, Yale, and Drexel Universities. His collaboration with Venturi and Scott Brown on Learning from Las Vegas began in a studio at the University of Pennsylvania as a teaching assistant.


Substance for a writer consists not merely of those realities he thinks he discovers; it consists even more of those realities which have been made available to him by the literature and idioms of his own day and by the images that still have vitality in the literature of the past.

Stylistically, a writer can express his feeling about this substance either by imitation, if it sits well with him, or by parody, if it doesn’t.

Richard Poirier

Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another way which is more tolerant: that is to question how we look at things.

The Commercial Strip, the Las Vegas Strip in particular – it is the example par excellence – challenges the architect to take a positive, non-chip-on-the-shoulder view. Architects are out of the habit of looking non-judgmentally at the environment because orthodox Modern architecture is progressive, if not revolutionary, utopian and puristic; it is dissatisfied with existing conditions. Modern architecture has been anything but permissive: architects have preferred to change the existing environment rather than enhance what is there.

But to gain insight from the commonplace is nothing new: fine art often follows folk art. Romantic architects of the eighteenth century discovered an existing and conventional rustic architecture. Early Modern architects appropriated an existing and conventional industrial vocabulary without much adaptation. Le Corbusier loved grain elevators and steam ships; the Bauhaus looked like a factory; Mies [van der Rohe] refined the details of American steel factories for concrete buildings. Modern architects work through analogy, symbol, and image – although they have gone to lengths to disclaim almost all determinants of their forms except structural necessity and the program – and they derive insights, analogies, and stimulation from unexpected images. There is a perversity in the learning process: we look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward.

Architects who can accept the lessons of primitive vernacular architecture, so easy to take in an exhibit like “Architecture Without Architects,” and of industrial, vernacular architecture, so easy to adapt to an electronic and space vernacular as elaborate neo-Brutalist or neo-Constructivist mega-structures, do not easily acknowledge the validity of the commercial vernacular. Creating 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.

Modern architecture has not so much excluded the commercial vernacular as it has tried to take it over by inventing and enforcing a vernacular of its own, improved and universal. It has rejected the combination of fine art and crude art. The Italian landscape has always harmonized the vulgar and the Vitruvian: the contorni around the duomo, the potiere’s laundry across the padrone’s portone, Supercortemaggiore against the Romanesque apse. Naked children have never played in our fountains and I.M. Pei will never be happy on Route 66.
ARCHITECTURE AS SPACE

Architects have been bewitched by a single element of the Italian landscape: the piazza. Its traditional, pedestrian-scaled, and intricately enclosed space is easier to take than the spatial sprawl of Route 66 and Los Angeles. Architects have been brought up on space, and enclosed space is the easiest to handle. During the last forty years, theorists of Modern architecture ([Frank Lloyd] Wright and Le Corbusier sometimes excepted) have focused on space as the essential ingredient which separates architecture from painting, sculpture, and literature. Their definitions glory in the uniqueness of the medium, and although sculpture and painting may sometimes be allowed spatial characteristics, sculptural or pictorial architecture is unacceptable. That is because space is sacred.

Purist architecture was partly a reaction against nineteenth-century eclecticism. Gothic churches, Renaissance banks, and Jacobean manors were frankly picturesque. The mixing of styles meant the mixing of media. Dressed in historical styles, buildings evoked explicit associations and Romantic allusions to the past to convey literary, ecclesiastical, national, or programmatic symbolism. Definitions of architecture as space and form at the service of program and structure were not enough. The overlapping of disciplines may have diluted the architecture, but it enriched the meaning.

Modern architects abandoned a tradition of iconology in which painting, sculpture, and graphics were combined with architecture. The delicate hieroglyphics on a bold pylon, the archetypal inscriptions on a Roman architrave, the mosaic processions in Sant’ Apollinare, the ubiquitous tattoos over a Giotto chapel, the enshrined hierarchies around a Gothic portal, even the illusionistic frescoes in a Venetian villa all contain messages beyond their ornamental contribution to architectural space. The integration of the arts in Modern architecture has always been called a good thing. But one didn’t paint on Mies. Painted panels were floated independently of the structure by means of shadow joints; sculpture was in or near but seldom on the building. Objects of art were used to reinforce architectural space at the expense of their own content. The Kolbe in the Barcelona Pavilion was a foil to the directed spaces: the message was mainly architectural. The diminutive signs in most modern buildings contained only the most necessary messages, like “Ladies,” minor accents begrudgingly applied.

ARCHITECTURE AS SYMBOL

Critics and historians who documented the “decline of popular symbols” in art, supported orthodox Modern architects who shunned symbolism of form as an expression or reinforcement of content: meaning was to be communicated through the inherent, physiognomic characteristics of form. The creation of architectural form was to be a logical process, free from images of past experience, determined solely by program and structure, with an occasional assist, as Alan Colquhoun has suggested, from intuition.

But some recent critics have questioned the possible level of content to be derived from abstract forms. And others have demonstrated that the functionalists despite their protestations, derived a formal vocabulary of their own, mainly from current art movements and the industrial vernacular; latter-day followers like the Archigram group have turned, while similar protesting, to Pop Art and the space industry. Indeed, not only are we not free from the forms of the past, and from the availability of these forms as typological models, but...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. However, most critics have slighted a continuing iconology in popular commercial art: the persuasive heraldry which pervades our environment from the advertising pages of the New Yorker to the super-billboards of Houston. And their theory of the “debasement” of symbolic architecture in nineteenth-century eclecticism has blinded them to the value of the representational architecture along highways. Those who acknowledge this roadside eclecticism denigrate it because it flaunts the cliché of a decade ago as well as the style of a century ago. But why not? Time travels fast today.

The Miami-Beach Modern motel on a bleak stretch of highway in southern Delaware reminds the jaded driver of the welcome luxury of a tropical
resort, persuading him, perhaps, to forgo the gra-
cious plantation across the Virginia border called
Motel Monticello. The real hotel in Miami alludes
to the international stylishness of a Brazilian resort,
which, in turn, derives from the International Style
of middle Corbu. This evolution from the high
source through the middle source to the low source
took only thirty years. Today, the middle source,
the neo-Eclectic architecture of the 1940s and
1950s is less interesting than its commercial adap-
tations. Roadside copies of Ed Stone [Edward
Durrell Stone] are more interesting than the real
Ed Stone.

The sign for the Motel Monticello, a silhouette
of an enormous Chippendale highboy, is visible on
the highway before the motel itself. This archi-
tecture of styles and signs is antispatial; it is an
architecture of communication over space; com-
munication dominates space as an element in the
architecture and in the landscape. But it is for a
new scale of landscape. The philosophical asso-
ciations of the old eclecticism evoked subtle and
complex meanings to be savored in the docile
spaces of a traditional landscape. The commercial
persuasion of roadside eclecticism provokes bold
impact in the vast and complex setting of a new
landscape of big spaces, high speeds, and complex
programs. Styles and signs make connections
among many elements, far apart and seen fast. The
message is basely commercial, the context is basi-
cally new.

A driver thirty 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
no 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.

The dominance of signs over space at a pedes-
trian scale occurs in big airports. Circulation in a
big railroad station required little more than a
simple axial system from taxi to train, by ticket
window, stores, waiting room, and platform, virtu-
ally without signs. Architects object to signs in
buildings: “if the plan is clear you can see where
to go.” But complex programs and settings require
complex combinations of media beyond the purer
architectural triad of structure, form, and light at
the service of space. They suggest an architecture
of bold communication rather than one of subtle
expression.

**THE ARCHITECTURE OF PERSUASION**

The cloverleaf and airport communicate with mov-
ing crowds in cars or on foot, for efficiency and
safety. But words and symbols may be used in space
for commercial persuasion. The Middle Eastern
bazaar contains no signs, the strip is virtually all
signs. In the bazaar, communication works through
proximity. Along its narrow aisles buyers feel and
smell the merchandise, and explicit oral persuasion
is applied by the merchant. In the narrow streets
of the medieval town, although signs occur, persua-
sion is mainly through the sight and smell of the
real cakes through the doors and windows of the
bakery. On Main Street, shop-window displays for
pedestrians along the sidewalks, and exterior signs,
perpendicular to the street for motorists, dominate
the scene almost equally.

On the commercial strip the supermarket win-
dows contain no merchandise. There may be signs
announcing the day’s bargains, but they are to be
read by the pedestrians approaching from the park-
ing lot. The building itself is set back from the
highway and half hidden, as is most of the urban
environment, by parked cars. The vast parking
lot is in front, not at the rear, since it is a symbol
as well as a convenience. The building is low be-
cause air conditioning demands low spaces, and
merchandising techniques discourage second floors;
its architecture is neutral because it can hardly
be seen from the road. Both merchandise and
architecture are disconnected from the road. The
big sign leaps to connect the driver to the store,
and down the road the cake mixes and detergents
are advertised by their national manufacturers
on enormous billboards inflected toward the high-
way. The graphic sign in space has become the
architecture of this landscape. Inside, the A&P has
reverted to the bazaar except that graphic packag-
ing has replaced the oral persuasion of the mer-
chant. At another scale, the shopping center off
the highway returns in its pedestrian mall to the
medieval street.
HISTORICAL TRADITION AND THE A&P

The A&P parking lot is a current phase in the evolution of vast space since Versailles. The space which divides high-speed highway and low, sparse buildings produces no enclosure and little direction. To move through a piazza is to move between high enclosing forms. To move through this landscape is to move over vast expansive texture: the megatexture of the commercial landscape. The parking lot is the parterre of the asphalt landscape. The patterns of parking lines give direction much as the paving patterns, curbs, borders, and tapis verts give direction in Versailles; grids of lamp posts substitute for obelisks and rows of urns and statues, as points of identity and continuity in the vast space. But it is the highway signs through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, their particular positions in space, their inflected shapes, and their graphic meanings which identify and unify the megatexture. They make verbal and symbolic connections through space, communicating a complexity of meanings through hundreds of associations in few seconds from far away. Symbol dominates space. Architecture is not enough. Because the spatial relationships are made by symbols more than by forms, architecture in this landscape becomes symbol in space rather than form in space. Architecture defines very little: the big sign and the little building is the rule of Route 66.

The sign is more important than the architecture. This is reflected in the proprietor’s budget: the sign at the front is a vulgar extravaganza, the building at the back, a modest necessity. The architecture is what’s cheap. Sometimes the building is the sign: the restaurant in the shape of a hamburger is sculptural symbol and architectural shelter. Contradiction between outside and inside was common in architecture before the Modern Movement, particularly in urban and monumental architecture. Baroque domes were symbols as well as spatial constructions, and they were bigger in scale and higher outside than inside in order to dominate their urban setting and communicate their symbolic message. The false fronts of western stores did the same thing. They were bigger and taller than the interiors they fronted to communicate the store’s importance and to enhance the quality and unity of the street. But false fronts are of the order and scale of Main Street. From the desert town on the highway in the West of today we can learn new and vivid lessons about an impure architecture of communication. The little low buildings, grey brown like the desert, separate and recede from the street which is now the highway, their false fronts disengaged and turned perpendicular to the highway as big high signs. If you take the signs away there is no place. The desert town is intensified communication along the highway.

Las Vegas is the apotheosis of the desert town. Visiting Las Vegas in the mid-1960s was like visiting Rome in the late 1940s. For young Americans in the 1940s, familiar only with the auto-scaled, gridiron city, and the antiurban theories of the previous architectural generation, the traditional urban spaces, the pedestrian scale, and the mixtures yet continuities of styles of the Italian piazzas were a significant revelation. They rediscovered the piazza. Two decades later architects are perhaps ready for similar lessons about large open space, big scale, and high speed. Las Vegas is to the Strip what Rome is to the Piazza.

There are other parallels between Rome and Las Vegas: their expansive settings in the Campagna and in the Mojave Desert, for instance, which tend to focus and clarify their images. Each city vividly superimposes elements of a supranational scale on the local fabric: churches in the religious capital, casinos and their signs in the entertainment capital. These cause violent juxtapositions of use and scale in both cities. Rome’s churches, off streets and piazzas, are open to the public; the pilgrim, religious or architectural, can walk from church to church. The gambler or architect in Las Vegas can similarly take in a variety of casinos along the Strip. The casinos and lobbies of Las Vegas which are ornamental and monumental and open to the promenading public are, a few old banks and railroad stations excepted, unique in American cities. Nolli’s map of the mid-eighteenth century, reveals the sensitive and complex connections between public and private space in Rome. Private building is shown in gray hatching which is carved into by the public spaces, exterior and interior. These spaces, open or roofed, are shown in minute detail through darker poché. Interiors of churches read like piazzas and courtyards of palaces, yet a variety of qualities and scales is articulated. Such a map for Las Vegas would reveal and clarify the public and the private at another scale, although the iconology
of the signs in space would require other graphic methods.

A conventional map of Las Vegas reveals two scales of movement within the gridiron plan: that of Main Street and that of the Strip. The main street of Las Vegas is Fremont Street, and the earlier of two concentrations of casinos is located along three or four blocks of this street. The casinos here are bazaar-like in the immediacy of their clicking and tinkling gambling machines to the sidewalk. The Fremont Street casinos and hotels focus on the railroad depot at the head of the street; here the railroad and main street scales of movement connect. The bus depot is now the busier entrance to town, but the axial focus on the rail depot from Fremont Street is visual, and possibly symbolic. This contrasts with the Strip, where a second and later development of casinos extends southward to the airport, the jet-scale entrance to town.

One’s first introduction to Las Vegas architecture is a replica of Eero Saarinen’s TWA Terminal, which is the local airport building. Beyond this piece of architectural image, impressions are scaled to the car rented at the airport. Here is the unraveling of the famous Strip itself, which, as Route 91, connects the airport with the downtown.

**SYSTEM AND ORDER ON THE STRIP**

The image of the commercial strip is chaos. The order in this landscape is not obvious. The continuous highway itself and its systems for turning are absolutely consistent. The median strip accommodates the U-turns necessary to a vehicular promenade for casino-crawlers, as well as left turns onto the local street pattern which the Strip intersects. The curbing allows frequent right turns for casinos and other commercial enterprises and eases the difficult transitions from highway to parking. The street lights function superfluously along many parts of the Strip which are incidentally but abundantly lit by signs; but their consistency of form and position and their arching shapes begin to identify by day a continuous space of the highway, and the constant rhythm contrasts effectively with the uneven rhythms of the signs behind.

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 since 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.

**THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE STRIP**

A typical casino complex contains a building which is near enough to the highway to be seen from the road across the parked cars, yet far enough back to accommodate driveways, turnarounds, and parking. The parking in front is a token: it reassures the customer but does not obscure the building. It is prestige parking: the customer pays. The bulk of the parking, along the sides of the complex, allows direct access to the hotel, yet stays visible from the highway. Parking is never at the back. The scales of movement and space of the highway determine distances between buildings: they must be far apart to be comprehended at high speeds. Front footage on the Strip has not yet reached the value it once had on main street and parking is still an appropriate
filler. Big space between buildings is characteristic of the Strip. It is significant that Fremont Street is more photogenic than the Strip. A single post card can carry a view of the Golden Horseshoe, the Mint Hotel, the Golden Nugget, and the Lucky Casino. A shot of the Strip is less spectacular; its enormous spaces must be seen as moving sequences.

The side elevation of the complex is important because it is seen by approaching traffic from a greater distance and for a longer time than the facade. The rhythmic gables on the long, low, English medieval style, half-timbered motel sides of the Aladdin Casino read emphatically across the parking space and through the signs and the giant statue of the neighboring Texaco station, and contrast with the modern Near-Eastern flavor of the casino front. Casino fronts on the Strip often inflect in shape and ornament toward the right, to welcome right-lane traffic. Modern styles use a porte-cochère which is diagonal in plan. Brazilianoid International styles use free forms. Service stations, motels, and other simpler types of buildings conform in general to this system of inflection toward the highway through the position and form of their elements. Regardless of the front, the back of the building is styleless because the whole is turned toward the front and no one sees the back.

Beyond the town, the only transition between the Strip and the Mojave Desert is a zone of rusting beer cans. Within the town the transition is as ruthlessly sudden. Casinos whose fronts relate so sensitively to the highway, turn their ill-kept backsides toward the local environment, exposing the residual forms and spaces of mechanical equipment and service areas.

Signs inflect toward the highway even more than buildings. The big sign – independent of the building and more or less sculptural or pictorial – inflects by its position, perpendicular to and at the edge of the highway, by its scale and sometimes by its shape. The sign of the Aladdin Casino seems to bow toward the highway through the inflection in its shape. It also is three-dimensional and parts of it revolve. The sign at the Dunes is more chaste: it is only two-dimensional and its back echoes its front, but it is an erection twenty-two stories high which pulsates at night. The sign for the Mint Casino on Route 91 at Fremont Street inflects towards the Casino several blocks away. Signs in Las Vegas use mixed media – then words, pictures, and sculpture – to persuade and inform. The same sign works as polychrome sculpture in the sun and as black silhouette against the sun; at night it is a source of light. It revolves by day and moves by the play of light at night. It contains scales for close up and for distance. Las Vegas has the longest sign in the world, the Thunderbird, and the highest, the Dunes. Some signs are hardly distinguishable at a distance from the occasional highrise hotels along the Strip. The sign of the Pioneer Club on Fremont Street talks. Its cowboy, sixty feet high, says “Howdy Pardner” every thirty seconds. The big sign at the Aladdin has spawned a little sign with similar proportions to mark the entrance to the parking. “But such signs!” says Tom Wolfe. They

soar in shapes before which the existing vocabulary of art history is helpless. I can only attempt to supply names – Boomerang Modern, Palette Curvilinear, Flash Gordon Ming-Alert Spiral, McDonald’s Hamburger Parabola, Mint Casino Elliptical, Miami Beach Kidney.

Buildings are also signs. At night on Fremont Street whole buildings are illuminated, but not through reflection from spotlights; they are made into sources of light by closely spaced neon tubes.

LAS VEGAS STYLES

The Las Vegas casino is a combination form. The complex program of Caesar’s Palace – it is the newest – includes gambling, dining, and banquetting rooms, night clubs and auditoria, stores, and a complete hotel. It is also a combination of styles. The front colonnade is San Pietro Bernini in plan, but Yamasaki in vocabulary and scale; the blue and gold mosaic work is Early Christian, tomb of Galla Placidia. (Naturally the Baroque symmetry of its prototype precludes an inflection toward the right in this facade.) Beyond and above is a slab in Gio Ponti, Pirelli-Baroque, and beyond that, in turn, a lowrise in neo-Classical Motel Moderne. Each of these styles is integrated by a ubiquity of Ed Stone screens. The landscaping is also eclectic. Within the Piazza San Pietro is the token parking lot. Among the parked cars rise five fountains rather than the two of Carlo Maderno. Villa d’Este cypress further punctuate the parking environment;
Gian da Bologna’s *Rape of the Sabine Women*, and various statues of Venus and David, with slight anatomical exaggerations, grace the area around the porte-cochère. Almost bisecting a Venus is an Avis: a sign identifying No. 2’s office on the premises.

The agglomeration of Caesar’s Palace and of the Strip as a whole approach the spirit if not the style of the late Roman Forum with its eclectic accumulations. But the sign of Caesar’s Palace with its Classical, plastic columns is more Etruscan in feeling than Roman. Although not so high as the Dunes sign next door or the Shell sign on the other side, its base is enriched by Roman Centurions, lacquered like Oldenburg hamburgers, who peer over the acres of cars and across their desert empire to the mountains beyond. Their statuesque escorts, carrying trays of fruit, suggest the festivities within, and are a background for the family snapshots of Middle Westerners. A massive Miesian light-box announces square, expensive entertainers like Jack Benny in 1930s-style marquis lettering appropriate for Benny, if not for the Roman architrave it almost ornaments. The light-box is not in the architrave; it is located off-center on the columns in order to inflect toward the highway.

**THE INTERIOR OASIS**

If the back of the casino is different from the front for the sake of visual impact in the autoscape, the inside contrasts with the outside for other reasons. The interior sequence from the front door back, progresses from gambling areas to dining, entertainment, and shopping areas to hotel. Those who park at the side and enter there can interrupt the sequence, but the circulation of the whole focuses on the gambling rooms. In a Las Vegas Hotel the registration desk is invariably behind you when you enter the lobby; before you are the gambling tables and machines. The lobby is the gambling room. The interior space and the patio, in their exaggerated separation from the environment, have the quality of an oasis.

**LAS VEGAS LIGHTING**

The gambling room is always very dark; the patio, always very bright. But both are enclosed: the former has no windows, the latter is open only to the sky. The combination of darkness and enclosure of the gambling room and its subspaces makes for privacy, protection, concentration, and control. The intricate maze under the low ceiling never connects with outside light or outside space. This disorients the occupant in space and time. He loses track of where he is and when it is. Time is limitless because the light of noon and midnight are exactly the same. Space is limitless because the artificial light obscures rather than defines its boundaries. Light is not used to define space. Walls and ceilings do not serve as reflective surfaces for light, but are made absorbent and dark. Space is enclosed but limitless because its edges are dark. Light sources, chandeliers, and the glowing, juke-box-like gambling machines themselves, are independent of walls and ceilings. The lighting is anti-architectural. Illuminated baldachini, more than in all Rome, hover over tables in the limitless shadowy restaurant at the Sahara Hotel.

The artificially lit, air conditioned interiors complement the glare and heat of the agoraphobic auto-scaled desert. But the interior of the motel patio behind the casino is literally the oasis in a hostile environment. Whether Organic Modern or neo-Classical Baroque, it contains the fundamental elements of the classic oasis: courts, water, greenery, intimate scale, and enclosed space. Here they are a swimming pool, palms, grass, and other horticultural importations set in a paved court surrounded by hotel suites balconied or terraced on the court side for privacy. What gives poignancy to the beach umbrellas and chaises lounges is the vivid, recent memory of the hostile cars poised in the asphalt desert beyond. The pedestrian oasis in the Las Vegas desert is the princely enclosure of the Alhambra, and it is the apotheosis of all the motel courts with swimming pools more symbolic than useful, the plain, low restaurants with exotic interiors, and the shopping malls of the American strip.

**THE BIG, LOW SPACE**

The casino in Las Vegas is big, low space. It is the archetype for all public interior spaces whose heights are diminished for reasons of budget and air conditioning. (The low, one-way mirrored ceilings also
permit outside observation of the gambling rooms.) In the past, volume was governed by structural spans: height was relatively easy to achieve. For us, span is easy to achieve, and volume is governed by mechanical and economic limitations on height. But railroad stations, restaurants, and shopping arcades only ten feet high reflect as well a changing attitude to monumentality in our environment. In the past, big spans with their concomitant heights were an ingredient of architectural monumentality. But our monuments are not the occasional tour de force of an Astrodome, a Lincoln Center, or a subsidized airport. These merely prove that big, high spaces do not automatically make architectural monumentality. We have replaced the monumental space of Pennsylvania Station by a subway above-ground, and that of Grand Central Terminal remains mainly through its magnificent conversion to an advertising vehicle. Thus, we rarely achieve architectural monumentality when we try; our money and skill do not go into the traditional monumentality which expressed cohesion of the community through big scale, united, symbolic, architectural elements. Perhaps we should admit that our cathedrals are the chapels without the nave; that apart from theaters and ball parks the occasional communal space which is big is a space for crowds of anonymous individuals without explicit connection with each other. The big, low mazes of the dark restaurant with alcoves combine being together and yet separate as does the Las Vegas casino. The lighting in the casino achieves a new monumentality for the low space. The controlled sources of artificial and colored light within the dark enclosure, by obscuring its physical limits, expand and unify the space. You are no longer in the bounded piazza but in the twinkling lights of the city at night.

INCLUSION AND THE DIFFICULT ORDER

Henri Bergson called disorder all order we cannot see. The emerging order of the Strip is a complex order. It is not the easy, rigid order of the Urban Renewal project or the fashionable megastructure – the medieval hilltown with technological trappings. It is, on the contrary, a manifestation of an opposite direction in architectural theory: Broadacre City – a travesty of Broadacre City perhaps, but a kind of vindication of Frank Lloyd Wright’s predictions for a commercial strip within the urban sprawl is, of course, Broadacre City with a difference. Broadacre City’s easy, motival order identified and unified its vast spaces and separate buildings at the scale of the omnipotent automobile. Each building, without doubt, was to be designed by the Master or by his Taliesin Fellowship, with no room for honky-tonk improvisations. An easy control would be exercised over similar elements within the universal, Usonian vocabulary to the exclusion, certainly, of commercial vulgarities. But the order of the Strip includes: it includes at all levels, from 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, like the shifting configurations of a Victor Vasarely painting. It is the unity which “maintains, but only just maintains, a control over the clashing elements which compose it. Chaos is very near; its nearness, but its avoidance, gives . . . force.”

Las Vegas is analyzed here only as a phenomenon of architectural communication; its values are not questioned. Commercial advertising, gambling interests, and competitive instincts are another matter. The analysis of a drive-in church in this context would match that of a drive-in restaurant because this is a study of method not content. There is no reason, however, why the methods of commercial persuasion and the skyline of signs should not serve the purpose of civic and cultural enhancement. But this is not entirely up to the architect.

ART AND THE OLD CLICHÉ

Pop Art has shown the value of the old cliché used in a new context to achieve new meaning: to make the common uncommon. Richard Poirier has referred to the “de-creative impulse” in literature:

Elliot and Joyce display an extraordinary vulnerability . . . to the idioms, rhythms, artifacts associated with certain urban environments or situations. The multitudinous styles of Ulysses are so dominated by them that there are only intermittent sounds of Joyce in the novel and no extended passage certifiably is his as distinguished from a mimicked style.
Eliot himself speaks of Joyce’s doing the best he can “with the material at hand.” A fitting requiem for the irrelevant works of Art which are today’s descendants of a once meaningful Modern architecture are Eliot’s lines in *East Coker*.

> 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.  

**NOTES**

3. Ibid., 14.
7. Ibid., 21.