

Learning from Las Vegas

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COLUMN A

The project Learning from Las Vegas is interesting for project management in urban design in the sense that its protagonists have done away with contemporary methods, tools, theories and discourses, including aesthetics, to make aspects of what it means to live today the central object of architectural production again. In the middle column of this page we gather only a few aspects of how this came about. With the death of Robert Venturi and the belated honor for Denise Scott Brown's contribution to Venturi's work, which won numerous prizes and positions, numerous exhibitions and publications on the life's work of the two have been compiled. The videos in this column originate from a conference at the AA in London and impressively show how and why Venturi and Scott-Brown's projects continue to be an integral part of the teaching, research and practice of so many architectural and urban planning practices. In a sense, with the Learning from format they have anticipated aspects of what is now celebrated as a real laboratory: the co-production of public, private and civil society actors in the realization of projects understood as knowledge production processes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RU3zUzHog3E>

AA School of Architecture. 2009. Denise Scott Brown - Learning from Bob and Denise - Part 1. Accessed January 4.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AM-l8RFExNA>

AA School of Architecture. 2009. Denise Scott Brown - Learning from Bob and Denise - Part 2. Accessed January 4.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ny4tgWwiLQ>

AA School of Architecture. 2009. Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi - Presentations and Discussion - Part 1. Accessed January 4.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ey_aVI7ZeAM

AA School of Architecture. 2009. Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi - Presentations and Discussion - Part 2. Accessed January 4.

ABOUT COLUMN A

The perspectivation of the urban “as is” has a prominent history in architectural education. About half a century ago, following Louis Wirth’s¹ notion of “urbanism as a way of life” (Wirth 1938), two architects worked against their own discipline’s purity. In a recent interview with Denise Scott-Brown (2016), she recalled that “Bob Venturi was the only member of the architecture faculty [at Penn] who sympathized with my attempts to straddle architecture and planning responsibly and also imaginatively.” Scott-Brown joined Penn in 1960 and together with Venturi was hired to relate theory to design. “From that time, we worked together—first as teachers, communicating ideas and subject matter, tying coursework to studio, architecture to planning, and the subject matter that interested [us], to the students’ work and ours as designers. In 1964 I ran the work topics, seminars and term papers for both courses. Bob’s lectures introduced new ways for architects to approach history as designers and formed the basis for *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.” There they argued to stop Mies van der Rohe-like modernism from becoming the building industry’s wet dream – pure construction. Both built their arguments on Kevin Lynch’s² 1960s work “*The Image of the City*”, which tried to operationalize the coproduction of spatial meanings on the basis of doing field research and mapping its results.

Scott-Brown and Venturi used these methods in combination with others in their seminal project **Learning from Las Vegas**. The project started as a manifesto-like piece in **Architectural Forum** in March 1968. It was conceived and written by Denise Scott-Brown and Robert Venturi entitled “*A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas*”. They wanted to do away with projects indebted to heroic and monumental modernism, transpose an existing urban situation into the academic realm of architectural production and re-negotiate architectural education from there. In the piece “*Mourning the Suburbs: Learning from Levittown*”, Beatrice Colomina tells the reader about the ‘density of urban unrest and challenges to normative architectural education’ during Scott-Brown and Venturi’s tenure at the School of Architecture at Yale University (Colomina 2011).

¹ From the 1930s onwards, Louis Wirth worked on the relationship between a theory of urbanism and sociological research methods. He developed numerous concepts such as density, city or urbanism as a form of social organization at a time when only few people, due to rapid urbanization, thought of engaging with the phenomenon of the city. “While the sociologist cannot solve any of these practical problems—at least not by himself he may, if he discovers his proper function, have an important contribution to make to their comprehension and solution. The prospects for doing this are brightest through a general, theoretical, rather than through an ad hoc approach” (Wirth 1938, 24).

² Kevin Lynch described his work in two books, *The Image of the City* (1960) and *What Time is Place?* (1972). He was a student of Frank Lloyd Wright’s, taught and researched at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and practiced location planning and urban planning in an office community. Lynch was driven to represent the ideas of the city in the everyday practices of its users and to turn them into the objects, or rather subjects, of urban planning. At a time when urban development was primarily driven by the industrial production of homes and cars, this must have been an audacious approach.

"Yale provided a focal point for demonstrators who were angry about the ongoing Vietnam War and about societal institutions that were slow to act on matters of racial and gender inequality (Shelton 2015)." Scott-Brown and Venturi transposed their thinking into writing and then into a prototype teaching project. The team taught and co-developed with their architecture and graphic design students new approaches in an integrative, hands-on and explorative way. The final spreads in the first published edition represent Venturi and Scott-Brown's efforts to include alternative perspectives in an interest not only to process the relations between observers and their aesthetics, but also to convey an understanding of the city as a "set of activities" (Venturi and Scott Brown 1977, 76). Later the project was made public in the form of an exhibition and Scott-Brown and Izenour together with the student Virginia Carroll scripted a plan for another studio titled "Learning from Levittown". However, the criticism within the School of Architecture about the approach and resources used in its operationalization eventually drove Venturi to give up teaching all together.

In the end, what seems relevant to today's efforts to co-produce urban forms of knowledge when re-visiting Learning from Las Vegas once more is the request that the architects sharpen the view of the existing world in its actual rather than in its imaginary complexity.

REFERENCES

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