

§ A SIGNIFICANCE FOR A&P PARKING LOTS,
OR LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS

"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."

Substitute
Newark for
Los Vegas



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, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things.

The commercial strip, the Las Vegas Strip in particular—the example par excellence (Figs. 1 and 2)—challenges the architect to take a positive, non-chip-on-the-shoulder view. Architects are out of the habit of looking nonjudgmentally 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 steamships; the Bauhaus looked like a factory; Mies 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. And withholding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything.

§ COMMERCIAL VALUES AND COMMERCIAL METHODS

Las Vegas is analyzed here only as a phenomenon of architectural

§ See material under the corresponding heading in the Studio Notes section following Part I.

1. Richard Poirier, "T. S. Eliot and the Literature of Waste," *The New Republic* (May 20, 1967), p. 21.

4

ARCHITECTURE AS SYMBOL

Critics and historians, who documented the "decline of popular sym-
bolism of form as an expression or refinement of content: meaning
was to be communicated, not through allusion to previously known
forms, but 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.

ARCHITECTURE AS SYMBOL

Modern architects abandoned a tradition of iconology in which painting, sculpture, and graphics were combined with architecture. The delicate hieroglyphics on a bold pyramid, the archetypal inscriptions of a Roman architrave, the mosaic processions in Santa Apollinare, the ubiquitous talitros over a Giotto Chapel, the enthroned hierarchies around a Gothic portal, even the illusionistic frescoes in a Venetian villa, all contained 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 did not paint on Alice's Palmered panels were floated independently of the structure by means of shadow points; 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 Kölle in the Barcelona Pavilion was a foil to the signs in most Modern buildings contained only the most necessary mes- sages, like LADIES, mirror accents being largely apoliced.

Los Angeles. Architects have been brought up on Space, and enclosed space is the easiest to handle. During the last 40 years, theorists of Modern architecture (Wright and Le Corbusier sometimes excepted) have focused on space as the essential ingredient that separates architectural form from sculpture, and literature. Their definitions glorify in the uniqueness of the medium; although sculpture and painting may sometimes be allowed spatial characteristics, sculpture or pictorial architecture is unacceptable—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.

Architects have been bewitched by a single element of the Italian landscape: the piazza. Its traditional, pedestrian-scaled, and intricately endosced space is easier to like than the sprawling of Route 66 and

ARCHITECTURE AS SPACE

Architects who can accept the lessons of primitive vernacular architecture, so easy to take in an exhibition like "Architecture without Architects," and of industrial, vernacular architecture, so easy to adapt to an electronic and space vernacular as elaborate neo-Bauhaus or neo-Constructs," will never be happy on Route 66.

BILLBOARDS ARE ALMOST ALL RIGHT

ommunication. Just as an analysis of the structure of a Gothic cath-
edral need not include a debate on the morality of medieval religion, so
as Vegas's values are not questioned here. The morality of commercial
advertising, gambling interests, and the competitive instinct is not at
issue here, although, indeed, we believe it should be in the architect's
wider sense, syncretic tasks of which an analysis such as this is but one as-
pect. The analysis of a drive-in restaurant, because this is a study of method, not content,
is a drive-in restaurant, because this is a study of isolation from the
architectural variables in this context would match that
of one of the architectural structures in isolation from all
others is a respecifiable scientific and humanistic activity, so long as all
are reasonably synthesized in design. Analysis of existing American urbanism is a
certainly desirable activity to the extent that it teaches us architects to
be more understanding and less authoritarian in the plans we make for
such inner-city renewal and new developments. In addition, there is no
reason why the methods of commercial persuasion and the skyline of
biggs analyzed here should not serve the purpose of civic and cultural
enhancement. But this is not entirely up to the architect.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF PERSUASION

been fast. The message is basely commercial; the context is apart and
curious and signs make connections among many elements, far apart and
separated by time.

A driver 30 years ago could maintain a sense of orientation in space, even simple crossroads a little sign with an arrow confirmed what was behaviour. One knew where one was. When the crossroads becomes a loverhead, one must turn right to turn left, a contradiction pollutes him to ponder paradoxical subtleties within a dangerous, dubious maze.

The dominance of signs over space at a pedestrian scale occurs in big cities. Circulation in a big railroad station requires little more than a simple axial system from taxi to train, by ticket window, stores, waiting room, and platform—all virtually without signs. Architects object to complex programs and settings requiring combinations of media beyond the purer architectural triad of structure, form, and light at the interface of space. They suggest an architecture of bold communication rather than one of subtle expression.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF PERSUASION

The cloverleaf and trumpet communitcate with moving crowds in cars or on foot for efficiency and safety. But words and symbols may be used in space for commercial persuasion (Figs. 6, 28). The Middle Eastern bazaar, community works through proximity. Along its narrow aisles, buyers feel and smell the merchandise, and the merchant applies explict oral persuasion. In the narrow streets of the medieval towns, although signs occur, persuasion is mainly through the sight and smell of the real cakes through the doors and windows of the bakery. Main Street, shop-window displays for pedestrians along the sidewalk walls and exterior signs, peculiar to the street for motorists, dominate the scene almost equally.

On the commercial strip the supermarket windows contain no mere handles. There may be signs announcing the day's bargains, but they are to be read by pedestrains approaching from the highway and half hidden in the urban environment, by parked cars (Fig. 9). The vast parking lot in front, not at the rear, since it is a symbol as well as a convenience.

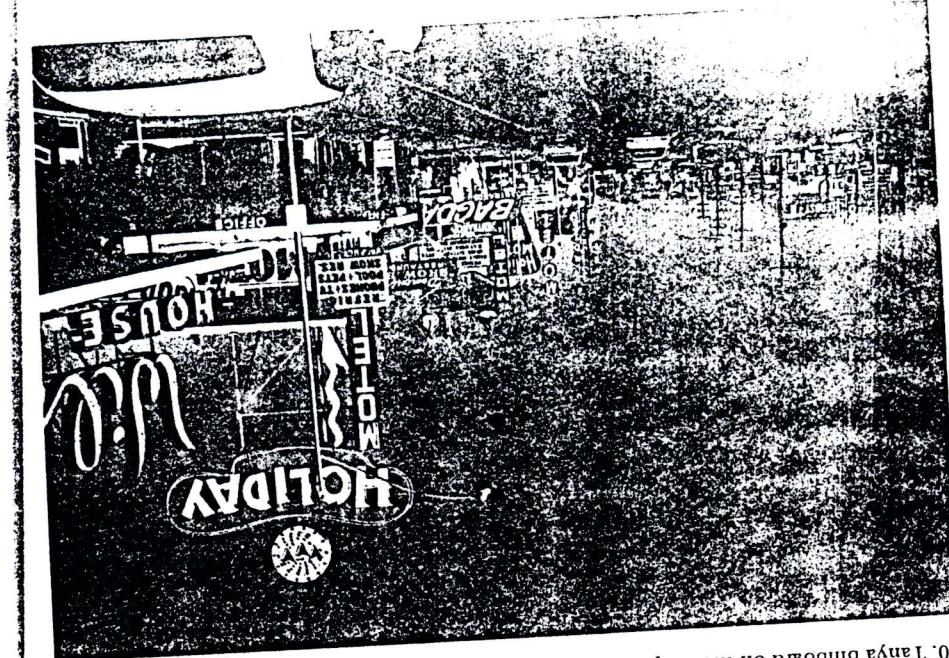
Architecturing techniques discourage second floors; its architecture is the building is low because air conditioning demands low spaces, and central because it can hardly be seen from the road. Both merchandising

LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS

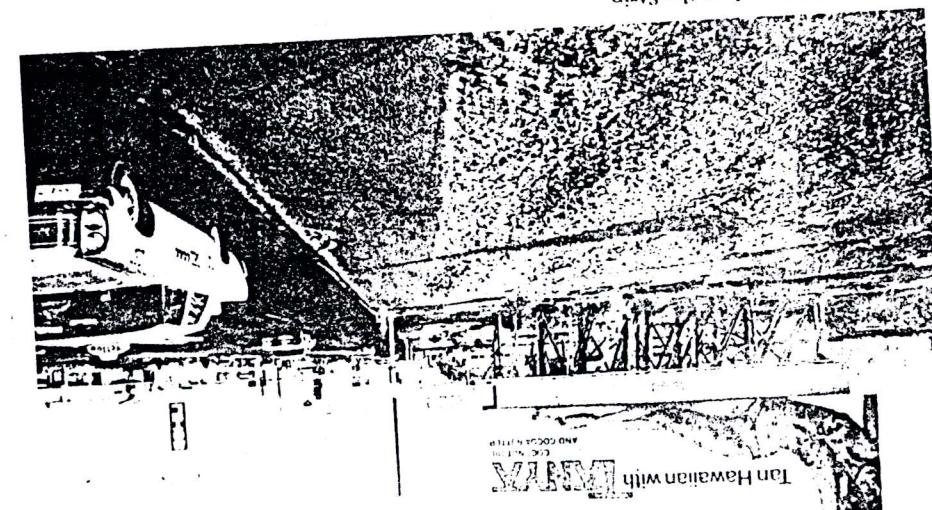
The architecture are discounmented from the road. The big sign leaps to connect the driver to the store, and down the road the cake mixes and detergent are advertised by their national manufacturers on enormous billboards inflicted toward the highway. The graphic sign in space has become the architecture of this landscape (Figs. 10, 11). Inside, the A&P has reverted to the bazaar except that graphic packaging has placed the oral persuasion of the merchant. At another scale, the shopping center off the highway returns in its pedestrian malls to the medieval street.

§ VAST SPACE IN THE HISTORICAL TRADITION AND AT THE A&P

Since Versailles (Fig. 12), The space that divides high-speed highway and low, sparse buildings produces no enclosure and little direction. To move through a pizza is to move between high enclosing forms. To move through this landscape is to move over vast expansive textures. The megalexture of the commercial landscape (Fig. 13). The parking lot is the megalexture of the asphalt landscape (Fig. 13). The parking lot is the megalexture of the vast space, but it is the highway silhouettes, through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, that provide their dominant symbols, rows of umps and statues as points of identity and continuity in the vast space. But it is the highway signs, through their hundreds of obelisks, give direction in Versailles; grids of lamp posts substitute for obelisks, give direction much as the paving patterns (Fig. 13). The patterns of the parking lots give direction much as the asphalt landscape (Fig. 13). The parking lot is the megalexture of the commercial landscape. The parking lot is the megalexture of the vast space in the evolution of vast space since Versailles (Fig. 12). The space in the current phase in the evolution of vast space since Versailles (Fig. 12).



10. Tanya billboard on the Strip



12

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, gray-brown like the desert, separate and recede from the street that 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.

FROM ROME TO LAS VEGAS

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, that tend to focus and clarify their images. On the other hand, Las Vegas *was* built in a day, or rather, the Strip was developed in a virgin desert in a short time. It was not superimposed on an older pattern as were the pilgrim's Rome of the Counter-Reformation and the commercial strips of eastern cities, and it is therefore easier to study. Each city is an archetype rather than a prototype, an exaggerated example from which to derive lessons for the typical. 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. The 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 are ornamental and monumental and open to the promenading public; a few old banks and railroad stations excepted, they are 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 (Fig. 17). Private building is shown in gray crosshatching that 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.

§ MAPS OF LAS VEGAS

A "Nolli" map of the Las Vegas Strip reveals and clarifies what is public and what is private, but here the scale is enlarged by the inclusion of the parking lot, and the solid-to-void ratio is reversed by the open spaces of the desert. Mapping the Nolli components from an aerial photograph provides an intriguing crosscut of Strip systems (Fig. 18). These components, separated and redefined, could be undeveloped land, asphalt, autos, buildings, and ceremonial space (Figs. 19 *a-e*). Reassembled, they describe the Las Vegas equivalent of the pilgrims' way, although the description, like Nolli's map, misses the iconological dimensions of the experience (Fig. 20).

A conventional land-use map of Las Vegas can show the overall structure of commercial use in the city as it relates to other uses but none of the detail of use type or intensity. "Land-use" maps of the insides of casino complexes, however, begin to suggest the systematic planning that all casinos share (Fig. 21). Strip "address" and "establishment" maps can depict both intensity and variety of use (Fig. 22). Distribution maps show patterns of, for example, churches, and food stores (Figs. 24, 25) that Las Vegas shares with other cities and those such as wedding chapels and auto rental stations (Figs. 26, 27) that are Strip-oriented and unique. It is extremely hard to suggest the atmospheric qualities of Las Vegas, because these are primarily dependent on watts (Fig. 23), animation, and iconology; however, "message maps," tourist maps, and brochures suggest some of it (Figs. 28, 71).

§ MAIN STREET AND THE STRIP

A street map of Las Vegas reveals two scales of movement within the gridiron plan: that of Main Street and that of the Strip (Figs. 29, 30). The main street of Las Vegas is Fremont Street, and the earlier of two concentrations of casinos is located along three of four blocks of this street (Fig. 31). The casinos here are bazaarlike in the immediacy to the sidewalk of their clicking and tinkling gambling machines (Fig. 32). 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 depot building is now gone, replaced by a hotel, and the bus station is now the busier entrance to town, but the axial focus on the railroad depot from Fremont Street was visual, and possibly sym-

This contrast with the Strip, where a second and later development of casinos extends southward to the airport, the jet-scale entrance to town (Figs. 23, 24, 42, 43, 52, 54). Once's first introduction to Las Vegas architecture is a forebear 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 unravelling of the famous Strip itself, which, as Route 91, connects the airport with the downtown (Fig. 33).

The image of the commercial strip is chaos. The continuous highway itself is not obvious (Figs. 34). The continuous highway itself and its systems for lighting are absolutely consistent. The median strip itself and its shape is not obvious (Figs. 34). The continuous highway itself and its commerce, the curbing allows frequent right turns for cabs and other vehicles as well as left turns onto the local street pattern that the Strip modulates. The curbs necessary to a vehicular promenade for casino entrances the U-turns necessary to the difficult transitions from highway to parking. The strip that functions superfluously along highway commercial enterprises and eases the difficult transitions from highway to parkings. The strip that functions superfluously along highway elements of the highway are civic. The buildings and signs are private. The elements of the highway are embassies. The signs behind the elements of the highway are individual order (Fig. 36).

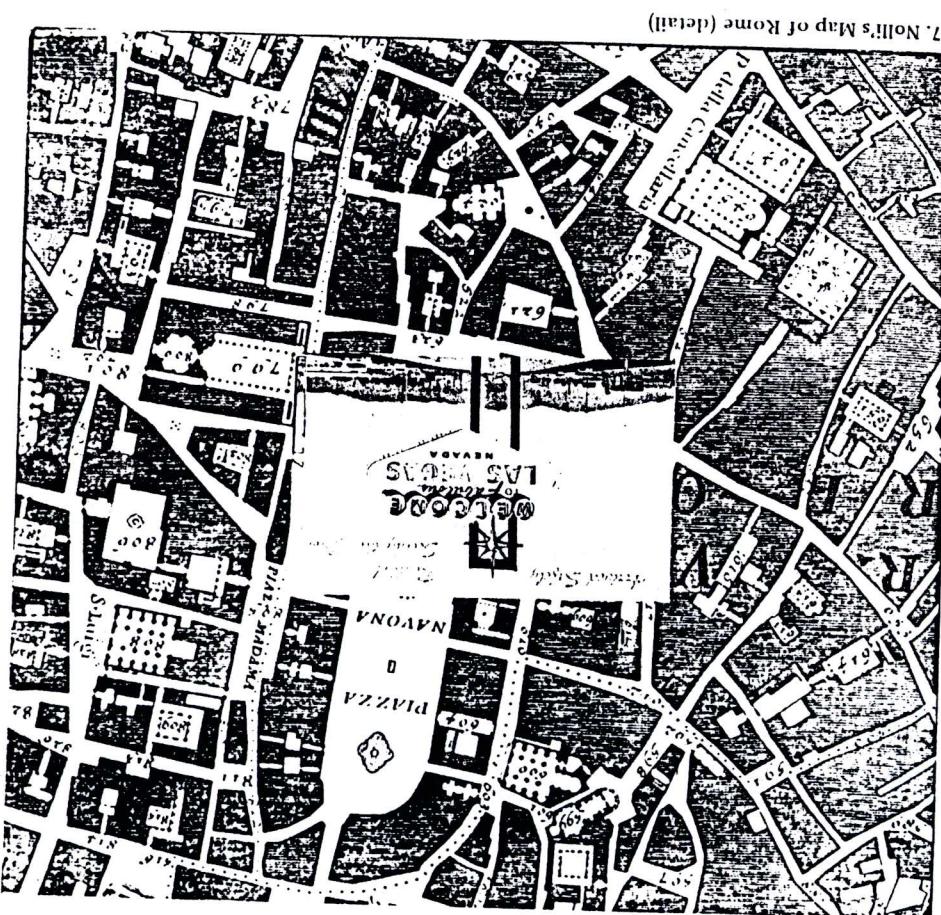
This visual order of buildings and signs. The zone of the highway is a shared order. The zone off the highway is an individual order (Fig. 36). On the Strip: the obvious visual order of street elements and the different counterpoint reinforces the contrast between two types of order (Fig. 35).

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hotel. It is also a combination of styles. The front colonnade is San Pietro-Bermini in plan but Yamasaki in vocabulary and scale (Figs. 54, 55); the blue and gold mosaic work is Early Christian tomb of Gallia Placidia. (The Baroque symmetry of its prototype predates an earlier Pirelli-Baroque, and beyond that, in turn, a low wing in Neo-classical Motel Moderne. Economics has vanquished symmetry in a re-creation addition. But the new slab and the various styles are integrated by a ubiquity of Ed Stone screens. The landscaping is also eclectic. Within the 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 gamblers in rooms.) In the past, volume was governed by strictures of economy easy to achieve. Today, span is easy to achieve, and volume is governed by mechanical means. Span is limited by height. But railroad stations, restaurants, and economic limitations on height. Built railroad stations, restaurants, and shopping arcades only ten feet high reflect as well a changing attitude.

The agglomeration of Caesars Palace and of the Strip as a whole appears like the spirit if not the style of the late Roman Forum with its eclectic accumulations. But the sign of Caesars Palace with its Classical, plastic columns is more Etruscan in feeling than Roman (Figs. 59, 60). Although not so high as the Dunes Hotel sign next door or the Shell sign on the other side, its base is enriched by Roman cornucopias (Fig. 61) lacquered like Oldenburg hamburgers, who peer over the acres of cars and across escorts, carrying trays of fruit, suggesting the festivities within and are a background for the family snapshots of Middle Westemers. Massive Alteian light boxes announce square, expansive enteraticers such as Jack Benny in 1930s-style marquee lettering appropriate for Beny if not for the Roman architecture it almost ornaments. The lights boxes are not in the architrave; they are located off-center on the columns in order to infect toward the highway and the parking.

§ LAS VEGAS SIGNS

The Las Vegas casino is a combination form. The complex program of Caesars Palace—one of the grandest—includes gambling, dining and banqueting rooms, nightclubs and auditoria, stores, and a complete

§ LAS VEGAS STYLES

lights of the city at night. You are no longer in the bounded pizza but in the twinkling low space. The contoured sources of artificial and colored light within the dark enclosures expand and unify the space by obscuring its physical limits. The light in the casino achieves a new monumentality for the Las Vegas alcoves combining being together and yet separate as does the Las Vegas lion with each other. The big, low masses of the dark restaurant with a space for crowds of anonymous individuals without explicit connection that theaters and ball parks, the occasional communal space that is big from our cathedrals are like chapels without the nave and choir, apart from the main we try; our money and skill do not go into the traditional monumental quality that expresses architectural elements. Perhaps we should scale, unified, symbolic, architectural cohesion of the community through big monumental advertising vehicle. Thus, we rarely through its magnificence conversion to Central Terminal remains mainly through its magnificence make of Pennsylvania Station by a subway above ground, and that of Grand Central Terminal monolithic. We have replaced the monumental space de force of an Astrodome, a Lincoln Center, or a subsidized airport. These merely prove that big, high spaces do not automatically make architecture monolithic. But our monuments are not the architectural monuments their concinnat hights were an ingrediant of architectural monu- tude to monumentality in our environment. In the past, big spans with their concinnat hights were an ingrediant of architectural monu- tude to monumentality in our environment. In the past, big spans with

§ ARCHITECTURAL MONUMENTALITY AND THE BIG, LOW SPACE

The principle 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 pretty shopping malls of the American strip.

seemingly incongruous advertising media plus a system of neo-Oligastic or neo-Wriggian restaurant motifs in Wallnut Formica (Fig. 69). 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 (Fig. 70). It is the unity that "mainains," but only just maintains, a control over the clashing elements which compose it. China is very near; its neatness, but its avoidance, gives . . .

IMAGE OF LAS VEGAS: ILLUSION AND
ILLUSION IN ARCHITECTURE

Tom Wolfe used Pop prose to suggest Powerful images of Las Vegas. Hotel brochures and tourist handouts suggest others (Fig. 71). J. B. Jackson, Robert Riley, Edward Ruscha, John Kouwenhoven, Kenner Bahnam, and William Wilson have elaborated on related images. For the architect or urban designer, comparisons of Las Vegas with others of the world's pleasure zones" (Fig. 72)—with Mahindra, the Alhambra, Xanadu, and Disneyland, for instance—suggest that essential to the imagery of pleasure-zone architecture are litheness, the quality of being mobile to engage visitors in a new role; for three days one may imagine oneself at the Riviera rather than a salacious person from Des Moines, Iowa, or an architect from Haddonfield, New Jersey.

LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS

85

INCLUSION AND THE DIFFICULT ORDER

blocks away. Signs in Las Vegas use mixed media—words, pictures, and sculptures—to persuade and inform. A sign is, contrariwise, for day and night. 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 evolves by day and becomes a play of lights at night (Figs. 64-67). It contains scales for close-up and for distance (Fig. 68). Las Vegas has the longest sign in the world, the Thunderbird, and the highest, the Dunes. Some signs are hardly distinguishable in a distance from the occasional high-rise hotels along the Strip. The sign of the Piñon Club on Fremont Street talks. Its cowboy, 60 feet high, says "Howdy Partner" every 30 seconds. The big sign at the Aladdin Hotel has sprawled a little sign with similar proportions to mark the entrance to the parking. "But sign which is helpless," says Tom Wolfe, "They soar in shapes before which the exulting vocabulary of art history is helpless. I can only imagine what supply names—Boomerang Motel, McDonald's Flamborela, Almit Casino Milagro, Alter Spiral, McDonaald's Parabola, Flash Gordon Phillipic, Alamil Beach Ridney." 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. Amid the diversity, the familiar Shell and Gulf signs stand out like friendly beacons in a foreign land. But in Las Vegas they reach three times higher into the air than at your local service station to meet the competition of the casinos.