1968

In an article entitled "A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas" published in *Architectural Forum* in March 1968 and written by **Robert Venturi** and **Denise Scott Brown**, the incipient populism of Venturi's earlier
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Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture came to fruition. The authors would test their ideas in a design studio and field study conducted with Steven Izenour at Yale School of Architecture that fall, publishing it in 1972 in book form as *Learning from Las Vegas*, along with two other chapters: one a more generalized argument derived from the first, entitled "Ugly and Ordinary Architecture, or the Decorated Shed," the other a catalogue of buildings designed by the Venturi firm —"Some Decorated Sheds"—from 1965 on. The following article by Scott Brown represents a first formulation of the decorated shed thesis.

In the transition from "complexity and contradiction" to "ugly and ordinary," the aesthetic criteria of Venturi's earlier book gave way to an empirical sociology and semiotics (still in a purely formal context) derived from current American social planning and communications theory. The reliance on ideas developed by
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Herbert Gans, Melvin Webber, Paul Davidoff, and others reflected the inputs of Scott Brown, a South African educated at the Architectural Association in London in the early 1950s and then in urban planning at the University of Pennsylvania under Gans. Scott Brown brought to the husband-wife team (who began collaborating as early as 1960) not only the perspective of social science, but
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also her firsthand experience of New Brutalist "socioplastics" and Independent
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Group ideas, the latter having anticipated the American Pop movement by several years. The "almost all right" of Main Street, U.S.A., suggested in *Complexity and Contradiction*—"The main justification for honky-tonk elements in architecture is their very existence," Venturi had written—now became a didactic "judgment-deferred" analysis of the vernacular in places like Las Vegas and Levittown, and ultimately confirmed for its vitality and diversity. In an exchange with the Venturis published in 1971 in *Casabella*, Kenneth Frampton, one of the most vociferous critics of their position, argued that the would-be populism of the Strip was no more than the manipulation of the American consumer through advertising and other mythification: Las Vegas was created not *by* the people but, more cynically, *for* the people. Scott Brown retaliated by calling Frampton an "armchair revolutionary" with little understanding of American culture.

The second part of *Las Vegas* was focused on a semiotic distinction between the duck and the decorated shed—the building as a symbol in itself through its formal or spatial features as opposed to the building as a structure to which symbolism was applied. The authors felt the latter was more honest. Scott Brown later recalled how the concept evolved: "['On Ducks and Decoration'] was written while we were conducting the Las Vegas studio at Yale. Seeing modestly decorated Victorian warehouses through the train window on our weekly trip to New Haven; working in [Paul Rudolph's] Art and Architecture Building there; analyzing Las Vegas strip signs and reading *God's Own Junkyard* by Peter Blake, prescribed for the studio—one day all joined to form the now famous (or infamous) argument on the unadmitted symbolism of architectural form. I wrote the first draft . . . it was rewritten and extended in Part 2 of *Learning from Las Vegas*. In this early formulation, 'duck' is used metaphorically for the first time, but we refer to 'decoration' not 'decorated shed'; that idea came later."

The Venturis' validation of popular culture and its "forgotten symbolism" resulted in the advent of a Pop architecture in which high architecture emulated low. It also took inspiration from Andy Warhol's soup cans, Ed Ruscha's parking lots, and Tom Wolfe's *Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*.

From Architecture Canada, *October 1968, pp. 48–49. Courtesy of the authors.*

On Ducks and Decoration
Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi

Loos equated decoration with sin; Perret believed it always hid a fault in construction. International stylists believed it was valid as the *joie d'esprit* of the individual craftsman as he worked by hand on the great cathedrals sculpting to the glory of God, but that in a machine age the I-thou relation with materials and construction is lost and so is the point of decoration; the same *joie d'esprit* should now, it was felt, be expressed through the beautiful and precise use of machine-made building elements and the eloquent spaces of the building itself. The whole building is the decoration.

This may have been literally and ironically more true than was intended. Contemporary painting and sculpture is now generally accepted as a formal source of early modern architecture—whole buildings from this period, in fact, resembled constructivist sculptures or cubist paintings. But this happened on an unconscious level. Architects such as Le Corbusier lived their connection to the arts intensely and it came through in their work.

A vocabulary of forms whether consciously possessed or not is probably as important in the synthesizing process which gets from functional requirements to a building as is a load of bricks. Whether you call it "composition" or "plastic organization" you have to have a philosophy about it. Your philosophy may be more or less useful depending on how well it helps you relate forms to requirements.

Later architects have taken too literally the functionalist dictum and allowed the formal vocabulary (still unadmitted) to stultify. We don't admit the importance of having a philosophy about forms, because a good building should arise like Venus purely from the functional requirements. But since this is impossible, a repertoire of old hand-me-downs, from Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, or Lou Kahn slips in unnoticed while the pieties of each on antiformalism are mouthed.

Because applied decoration is still taboo the whole building is still the decoration. Only now, artists like Le Corbusier, sensitive to what they are denying, are not involved, so the formal vocabularies are dull, unsuited, and unrevised for today's needs. The more interesting the attempts of our best, most avant-garde architects at mannered complexity supposedly derived from structure and program, the more uninteresting their buildings become: they may heave themselves up on needless *pilotis*, corset themselves in rusted iron stays, zap out and up in plan and section ten stories, making twenty apartments with "bad space," or welcome in a heedless multitude to an unused piazza. They do these deeply distorting things for the sake of appearance, but they have no "decoration."

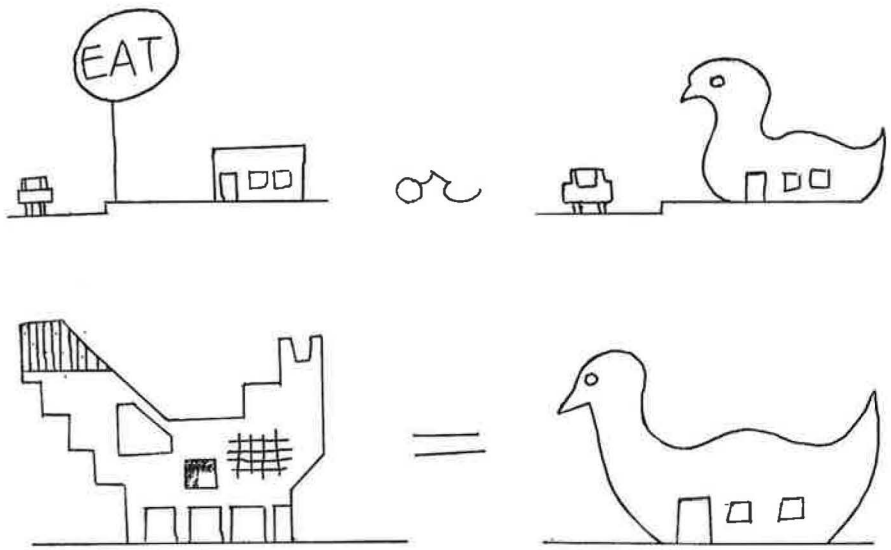
We believe a new interest in the architecture of communication involving symbolism and mixed media will lead us to reevaluate the eclectic and picturesque styles of the last century, to reappraise our own commercial architecture—pop architecture, if you wish—and finally to face the question of decoration. We have distinguished in a previous article[1] between two types of heraldry in the commercial environment: the sign which *is* the building (for example, the roadside duck, first brought to fame in Peter Blake's book) and the sign which *fronts* the building. The first distorts the less important inside function of drawing you in. The second, applied to the building or separated from it with the parking lot between, allows the modest eating function to take place without distortion in a modest building, right for it, and permits the symbolic function its own leeway as well—they need not coincide and it is probably cheaper and

easier if they don't.

Our thesis is that most architects' buildings today are ducks: buildings where an expressive aim has distorted the whole beyond the limits of economy and convenience; and that this, although an unadmitted one, is a kind of decoration, and a wrong and costly one at that. We'd rather see the need admitted and the decoration applied where needed, not in the way the Victorians did it but to suit our time, as easily as the billboard is pasted on its superstructure; with the building it is applied to allow it to go its own conventional way, no more distorted than are the functional wind bracing and catwalks of the superstructure. This is an easier, cheaper, more direct, and basically more honest approach to the question of decoration; it permits us to get on with the task of making conventional buildings conventionally and to deal with their symbolic needs with a lighter, defter touch. It may lead us to reevaluate Ruskin's horrifying statement, "architecture is the decoration of structure." But add to it Pugin's warning: it is all right to decorate construction, but never construct decoration.[2]

Notes

1. "Learning from Las Vegas, or a Significance for A & P Parking Lots," *Architectural Forum*, March 1968.
2. We are grateful to Mr. Alan Lapidus, A.I.A., for this indirect quotation.



1968

From its inception in 1926, the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia (IAUV) represented an alternative to the academic establishment in Rome and the politecnicos of Milan and Turin, Italy's main centers of architecture education. But it was Giuseppe Samonà's appointment as director of the Venice institute in 1945 that decisively transformed it into a privileged enclave for independent architectural thought. Over the next quarter century Samonà brought the country's most creative and challenging architects and intellectuals—Carlo Scarpa, Ignazio Gardella, Franco Albini, Bruno Zevi, Giancarlo de Carlo, Leonardo Benevolo, Carlo Aymonino—to teach there, while instigating a revision of modernism in terms of a sophisticated politics of culture and urbanism.

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In 1968, at Samonà's invitation, the thirty-three-year-old **Manfredo Tafuri**, then teaching in Palermo, entered into this context. Educated as an architect in Rome, where he had been exposed to the phenomenological Marxism of the philosopher Galvano della Volpe (later rejected as "sugary") and the writings of art historian Giulio Carlo Argan, Tafuri was close to the architect Ludovico Quaroni, on whom he wrote a monograph published by Comunità, the house of Adriano Olivetti, in 1964. He also worked with a group of young Roman colleagues on design projects focused on the "new urban dimension," a theme introduced earlier by Samonà. Alongside this activity, which extended to a book on modern architecture in Japan, he began his major study of the Renaissance.

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In Venice Tafuri initially continued to divide his attention between the culture of the Renaissance and modernism, charting out an ideological critique of architecture in the broadest possible historical context. (He was later to say of his project of critical history, "I am not a historian of architecture, but *also* a historian of architecture.") With Benevolo's departure for Rome, he founded the Institute for Historical Research within the IAUV, gathering a brilliant group of collaborators—among them Giorgio Ciucci, Francesco Dal Co, Mario Manieri-Elia, Marco de Michelis, and the philosopher Massimo Cacciari. In 1968 his first major theoretical work appeared, *Theories and History of Architecture*, the introduction of which follows. The book's title harbors a subtle Marxist distinction; later, in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (1980), he would insist on the *plurality* of history, revealing the distance he had traveled under the intellectual impact of Venice, engaged in rereadings of the Frankfurt School, Foucault, and postructuralism. This impact soon became apparent with Tafuri's revision of *Theories and History* in the direction of Cacciari's negative thought. In an essay titled "Per una critica dell'ideologia architettonica," published in 1969 in *Contropiano,* a journal whose editors included Cacciari and the literary historian Alberto Asor Rosa, he pushed his diagnosis of modernism's crisis under capitalism to a polemical extreme, arguing that there could no longer be a class architecture, an architecture for a "liberated society," only a class criticism of architecture. This stance provoked accusations of nihilism from Tomás Maldonado, for one, whose "hopes in design" Tafuri in turn rejected as reproducing the illusions of modernism. Tafuri expanded this essay as *Project and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* in 1973. The jacket of the English edition (1976) bore a drawing by Aldo Rossi, inscribed to Tafuri and entitled, not unambiguously, "Architecture Assassinated."

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For an illuminating study of the impact of Tafuri's thought and the Venice School in Italy and France, see Jean-Louis Cohen, *La Coupure entre architectes et intellectuels, ou les enseignements de l'italophilie* (1984).

From Manfredo Tafuri, Teorie e storia dell'architettura *(Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1968), pp. 9–18. English edition:* Theories and History of Architecture *(London: Granada, 1980), trans. Giorgio Verrecchia, pp. 1–9. Courtesy of the author and Gius. Laterza & Figli.*