ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE POP WORLD OF THE STRIP AND THE SPRAWL
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The Pop World Of the Strip And the Sprawl

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Last week, Washington was the City Beautiful, as L'Enfant and McMillan intended, with the blush of magnolias and cherry blossoms laced lightly with snow. It was false spring, and false winter, and even the city didn't seem quite real. Washington can be heartbreakingly lovely in the old-fashioned way of cities as places of dignity, elegance and grace, in spite of the mayhem being visited on it by commercial developers and government builders alike.

There is another kind of city inside the Renwick Gallery, the Smithsonian's handsomely restored Old Corcoran building that is now its national design showcase. "Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City" is a presentation of the 20th-century world of suburb, strip and sprawl—the uniquely American landscape that is studiously ignored by architects, planners and tastemakers in spite of the fact that it is the country's inescapable urban reality. It is here described, dissected and analyzed with brilliant scholarship and overwhelming completeness by the Philadelphia firm of Venturi and Rauch, the celebrated proponents of the Pop environment. Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour were the principals in charge, with Izenour the designer of the installation.

This exhibition is, therefore, a very special event. In spite of all the hints and teasers dropped in smaller shows and special publications by Denise Scott Brown and her husband, Robert Venturi, in recent years, this is a wrap-up effort: it is the definitive dissertation on the forms, symbols and sources of the American way of life. The built environment of modern society is carefully rendered and interpreted, from the invention of solutions for new needs to the bowdlerization of the past into acceptable images of aspiration and status. What emerges is a revealing picture of today's esthetic standards that has everything to do with what *is*, and little to do with what anyone thinks should be. The results go beyond the celebration of the "ordinary" to express a mobile society and the pluralism of its taste. All this is observed and documented with a staggering wealth of material, shrewd visual and historical insights, and clinical clarity.

In fact, this exhibition should have had prominent space at New York's Modern or Metropolitan, if either institution were seriously concerned with the legitimate development of theory and practice in terms of the architecture and urbanism of our age. But there is a particular pleasure to viewing it at the Renwick. To see McDonald's glowing golden arches (actual examples) embracing the Renwick's Victorian Corinthian columns is worth the trip to Washington. Set against this building's formal, 19th-century elegance—scheduled to be reduced to rubble not too long ago—the show becomes a double consciousness-raiser.

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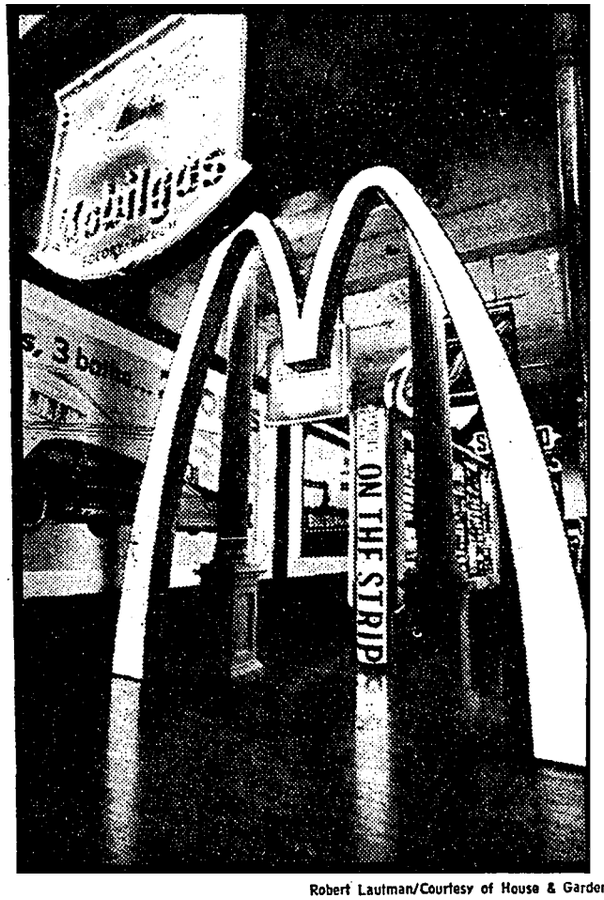
Because the space is small, the display is tightly condensed—which may even increase its effectiveness. It successfully balances didacticism and fun. Almost at dead center, there are three "model rooms" by Dian Boone, representing the norms of American taste. They are wickedly, tellingly observed.

An upper class, "country house" room is furnished with correct and handsome antiques plus the proper House Beautiful-type flowered sofa and chair, and approved accessories from just the right kind of dried flower arrangement to a butler's tray coffee table and a "period" magazine rack with the Wall Street Journal discreetly visible. The builder's "row house" room is a middle-class, furniture-store medley of matching, deep pile aqua rug and velvet upholstery grouped around a color TV in a "Renaissance" console, glass and brass and "Mediterranean" tables adorned with pineapple finials and family photographs, "French" wallpaper, "Austrian" curtains and "Georgian" drapes. The suburban "family room" is all Scotch plaid reproduction "colonial" comfort, a prominent "dry sink" bar under a fake tavern sign, coffee grinder lamps and Coca Cola cans, and the inevitable picture window.



Robert Lautman/Courtesy of House & Garden

'This exhibit is the definitive dissertation on the forms, symbols and sources of the American way of life.'

These rooms are joined by full-scale photo mock-ups of their environment: the "Williamsburg" type development (well-landscaped restraint), the row house city street (eclectic "personalized" touches of "hot" to "cool" historical reference in doors, shutters and decorative details), and typical suburbia (set-back houses on lawns that are meant to be alike, but not to look alike.)

Buttressing these displays are photographs and text panels that are an encyclopedia of recorded phenomena. Suburbia is defined not only in terms of economic stratification and social symbols, but as the expression of the traditional American rural ideal, plus the new leisure ideal, reinforced by domestic technology. This is the myth of the commuting "country squire" served by G.M. and G.E. The documentation is so overwhelming in its quantity and richness that it can barely be absorbed. How far the visitor wants to pursue the information depends on his standing strength and attention span. Fortunately, there are plans to bring out much of it later in book form.

The show comes brilliantly alive with the neon and lighted signs and billboards packed into the slender, 19th-century gallery labeled "The Strip." The effect of this vibrant, abstract montage of color, light and motion, from McDonald's to Mobil, is quite startlingly beautiful in the perverse way of Pop Art. The Holiday Inn sign never looked so good. Full-size billboards range from the historical artist-illustrator examples of Bull Durham tobacco to the instant impact of today's immense, art-director images for the high-speed road. An erudite iconography of the strip is expounded in a supplementary panel display.

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In the next room, there is a section on the city street, with its different system of spaces, signs and symbols. And throughout the galleries, there are outstanding photographs by Stephen Shore and a series of not-to-be-missed paintings of diners by John Bader.

What is so convincing and impressive about the exhibition as a whole is the comprehensive definition of the environmental and architectural art and taste of our time, and its careful relationship to the complex, conditioning factors of contemporary life. It places apparent ephemera and questionable esthetics into a secure historical continuum, and it establishes the current architectural vocabulary of myth, symbol and source. It can be called one of the most significant contributions to the writing of art history since the identification of Mannerism; there is really nothing controversial about it.

The Venturis claim that myth and symbolism have always been an integral, legitimate part of the style and values of any period. "People are more interested in representing their ideals and aspirations through architecture," the show text tells us, "than they are in noticing how well a building expresses its structure and function."

One cannot quarrel with that conclusion. It is, in fact, a perception long overdue. But one can argue with the Venturis' lectures on how the lessons implicit in the "messy vitality" of the real environment can or should be used by architects and designers. It is true that we can learn from suburbia and the strip; but there is something profoundly artificial about turning the results of historical and cultural process into a conscious and arbitrary esthetic act. One man's symbolism is another man's schlock.

That does not make these conclusions any less useful to art and history. This is the kind of show that changes the way you look at the world.