

AESTHETIC OR ANAESTHETIC:

The Competing Symbols of Las Vegas Strip

ABSTRACT

Postmodern theorists such as Lyotard, Jencks, Foster and Jameson acknowledge *Learning from Las Vegas* as a seminal text crucial to the development of postmodern aesthetics in architecture. Most commonly, the book is known to have promoted a postmodern laissez-faire approach that embraces historical architectural motifs uncritically. Critics of the book also point to the mindless image making and commercialism that *Learning from Las Vegas* promotes. In this paper, I draw parallels between Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's arguments and Nelson Goodman's theory of symbols in *Languages of Art* (1968) and argue that the postmodern rhetoric associated with the book limits a closer inspection of the book's methodology, the aim of which was to make architecture more communicable and make architects relearn to see.

The book proposed that architecture should reposition itself from its modernist emphasis on space and structure to a postmodern reading of signs and symbols. By reclaiming its symbolic content, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour hoped to turn architecture into a visible language – to make it socially less coercive and aesthetically more vital. More importantly, they claimed that this visibly vital architecture possessed a language that could be analyzed and evaluated. In fact, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's call for "withholding judgment" was to be "used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive." In a similar vein, Nelson Goodman associates the practice of disinterest with aesthetic cognition and argues that aesthetic experiences are not just limited to works of art, but that they can happen any time. The question we should ask is not "what is art?" but "when is art?" In doing so, Goodman shifts the emphasis to understanding aesthetics as a temporal moment/moments when some sort of deep transformation or cognition happens.

This paper analyzes the competing world of signs on the Strip in *Learning from Las Vegas* through a Goodmanian route of reference. It identifies Goodmanian symptoms, such as exemplification, complex and indirect reference, relative repleteness, and syntactic and semantic density. As symbol systems, these features are neither necessary nor sufficient for aesthetic functioning, but they are indications that the item is functioning as work of art.

— *Learning from Las Vegas*, first published in 1972, proposed that architecture should reposition itself from its modernist emphasis on space and structure to a postmodern reading of signs and symbols. This shift would allow architects to relearn to see and as a consequence, make the practice of design socially less coercive and aesthetically more vital. The book introduced suspending judgment as a mechanism to free the imagination and make subsequent judgments more sensitive.¹ This process, it was hoped, would increase the architect's capacity to make discriminations and learn from the everyday. Such an approach to aesthetic cognition that emphasizes learning has parallels with Nelson Goodman's arguments in his *Languages of Art*, first published in 1968, according to which aesthetic experiences distinguish themselves as moments of disinterest, enlightenment and transformation.

For Goodman, aesthetic experiences are not limited to works of art, but can happen any time. He stresses that the question to ask is not "What is art?" but "When is art?" And when art happens, it is the moment of non-judgment and disinterest that allows the subject to expand her horizon of viewing and experience the deep transformative potential of aesthetics. Aesthetic experiences are dynamic rather than static. In fact, Goodman argues that pictures are symbols that refer much the same way as words do. The difference lies in the semantic and syntactic structures that different arts employ. Experiencing aesthetics involves an elusive process of making delicate discriminations, discerning subtle rela-

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Venturi, Robert, Scott Brown, Denise and Izenour, Steven. 1977. *Learning from Las Vegas*, revised edition, Cambridge: MIT Press, 153.

tionships, identifying symbol systems and analyzing what these symbolic systems denote and exemplify. Most of all, it involves interpreting works and reorganizing the world in terms of works and works in terms of the world.²

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Goodman, Nelson. 1976. *Languages of Art: An Approach to A Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 241.

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Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 11-13

In *Learning from Las Vegas* Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour introduce the commercial strip as the new landscape of the automobile-driven environment. In this

landscape of big signs, small buildings and high speeds, architecture becomes a symbol, or a series of symbolic systems in space competing and often contradicting each other. The entire book, which is a collage of passages, short essays, maps and diagrams, initially conceived as a report of a design studio offered at Yale in 1967, aims to devise systems of thought that would allow architects to analyze the new emerging environment of the Strip. In this new landscape, buildings do not just denote the functions they house, but function as signs conveying multiple meanings.

For instance, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour write:

The big sign leaps to connect the driver to the store... and the graphic sign in space has become the architecture of landscape... It is the highway signs, through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, their particular positions in space, their inflected shapes, and their graphic meanings, that identify and unify the mega texture... Symbol dominates space. Architecture is not enough. Because the spatial relationships are made by symbols more than by forms, architecture in this landscape becomes symbols in space rather than forms in space. Architecture defines very little: The big sign and the little building is the rule of Route 66.³

In their book, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour promote an Ugly and Ordinary Architecture (U&O), as an alternative to the heroic modern architecture of pure form. They point out that in U&O architecture, communication happens through denotative meanings, derived from direct, literal references. For instance, the conspicuous sign that identifies the Fire Station just by the simple act of spelling it: FIRE STATION NO. 4., acts both as a symbol as well as an expressive architectural abstraction. Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour argue that such ges-

tures of naming are not merely ordinary, but they represent ordinariness. Furthermore, they point out that other levels of meanings are evoked via association, past experience, conventions and other indirect references. For instance, the Fire Station's function and its civic character is evoked by particular aspects of the building – its decorated false façade, the banality of its standard aluminum sash and roll-up doors, the flagpole located in front and so forth. This manner of identification points to the everyday ways in which aesthetic experiences can be discerned.

Goodman also emphasizes the day-to-day reasoning inherent in experiencing aesthetics and argues that the agent has the capacity to identify various particulars of an experience. In fact, aesthetic experiences in Goodman's work are understood as intentional states of mind in which we bear a responsibility for justification. For instance, judgments like "Louis Kahn's Salk Institute is, metaphorically, a monastic cloister" have the ability to change experience through arguments grounded in particulars. By the time we come to perceive the Salk Institute in this way, we have already deliberated about it. The serenity of the Salk Institute, the repetitive vocabulary of the building, the courtyard with a central channel of water, the concrete frame and teak cubicles, and even, perhaps, the idea of a religious experience in a monastic complex—all contribute to our "reading" of the Institute. These particulars may or may not combine in particular ways for an aesthetic experience to happen. The more important point is this: the possibilities of permutation and combination are infinite, yet they are amenable to some form of articulation and analysis.⁴

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For more on the relationship between Goodman's infinite particulars and Aristotelian practical reasoning, see Ritu Bhatt. 2000. "The Significance of the Aesthetic in Postmodern Architectural Theory." *Journal of Architectural Education*, MIT Press, May, 229-238.

What is interesting, however, is the shift in Goodman's thinking about architecture between the publication of his book *Languages of Art* and the essay "How Buildings Mean" in *Domus* in 1986. In *Languages of Art*, architecture poses problems for Goodman because he is unable to reconcile how notations such as plan drawings signify

meanings and how that compares with the different ways by which buildings exemplify multiple meanings. In “How Buildings Mean,” published in *Domus* (which was part of a special series commemorating the 45TH anniversary of *Domus*), Goodman’s analysis is singularly focused on indirect reference and exemplification. Goodman is invited along with other thinkers and philosophers such as Hans Georg Gadamer, Jacques Derrida and Kenneth Frampton to respond to the predicament faced by architects in assimilating postmodernism and deconstruction.⁵ In his introduction to Goodman’s piece the editor, Vittorio Magnano Lampugnani, describes Goodman as an original and lively American thinker who stands for a return to a rationalistic discipline. More importantly, Goodman is described as a philosopher who insists that next to truths exist lies, and that in this respect he is a “constructivist” or as he defines himself, a “constructionalist.” The editor Lampugnani ends his introduction by pointing out that, “it goes without saying that as such he is the opposite of deconstructionalist Derrida.”⁶

In this famous essay on architecture, Goodman cites Robert Venturi’s work and focuses his discussion entirely on exemplification and indirect reference.

Goodman writes, “when Robert Venturi writes of ‘contradiction’ in architecture, he is not supposing that a building can actually assert a self-contradictory sentence, but is speaking of exemplification by a building of forms that give rise when juxtaposed, because they are also severally exemplified in architecture of contrasting kinds (for example, classical and baroque), to expectations that contravene each other. The contradiction thus arises from indirect reference.”⁷ In fact, Goodman argues that the expression of meaning in architecture is seldom denota-

tional—at the level of description or representation. In most cases, buildings express meanings through exemplification. That is, that the building may not represent anything as such, but it may exemplify or express certain

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Goodman, Nelson. 1986. “Che cosa significa costruire, e quando e perché.” *Domus* 672, 17-28.

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Vittorio Magnano Lampugnani, in his Introduction to the Goodman article in *Domus* 672. Goodman is known to have respect for the deconstructionists. He saw his own work as a form of deconstructing language for purposes of achieving greater clarity and precision, and the elimination of spurious theories and issues. E-mail communication with Curtis Carter on March 3, 2003.

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Goodman, Nelson. “How Buildings Mean.” In Goodman, Nelson and Elgin, Catherine. 1988. *Reconceptions in Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 42.

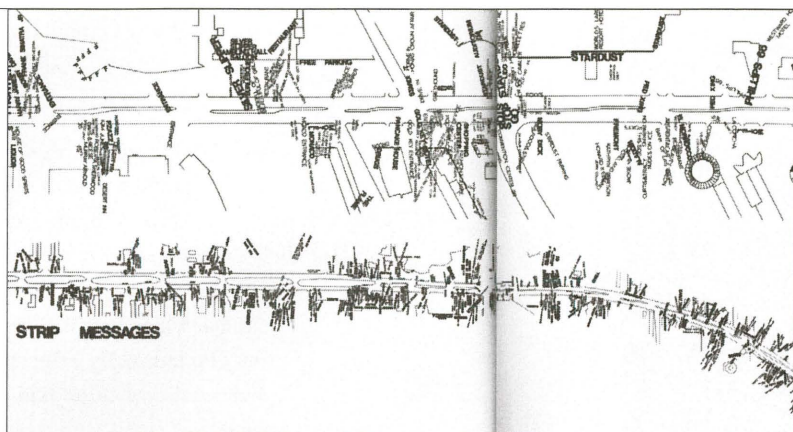


FIGURE 1 | *Strip Messages*

In the diagram “Strip Messages,” which displays every written word from the road as seen, the search for the complex ways by which particulars add to meaning in the landscape is evident. The particulars may or may not combine in particular ways for an aesthetic experience to happen. The more important point is this: the possibilities of permutation and combination are infinite, yet they are amenable to some form of articulation and analysis. (Figures 50, 51), pp. 20-21

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properties. Such reference, Goodman argues, runs not as denotation does, from symbol to what it applies to as label, but in the opposite direction, from symbol to certain labels that apply to it or to properties possessed by it.⁸ In fact, exemplification is one of the major ways by which architectural works mean; exemplified qualities are not qualities a building merely possesses but are qualities that the building exemplifies. For instance, Goodman gives the example of the Verzeihenheiligen pilgrimage church near Bamberg and shows that the qualities of synocopation and dynamism associated with the building depend not upon how different formal properties relate to each other but of the properties the building exemplifies. The emphasis on exemplification is central to Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour’s analysis, especially in how they demonstrate that, in the architecture of the highway strip, buildings do not inherently mean something.

⁸ Goodman, *Reconceptions*, 36.

Instead they combine false fronts that disengage themselves from the building, and reengage in the new world of the highway strip—turning themselves perpendicular to the highway as big signs competing and often contradicting each other. Las Vegas, for them, is an object lesson in complex relationships.

In a similar vein, Goodman emphasizes that works of art are not inert and they do not refer solely (if at all) to themselves. Works of art pick out, point to and refer to some of their properties but not to others. And most of these exemplified properties are also properties of other things, which are thus associated with, and may be indirectly referred to by, the work.

Goodman, *Reconceptions*, 40.

Furthermore, Goodman emphasizes the normative dimensions of interpreting both the literal as well as metaphorical aspects of art. Understanding a work of art, Goodman writes, is not to appreciate it, enjoy it or find it beautiful, but to interpret it correctly—and to recognize what and how it symbolizes and how what it symbolizes bears on other aspects of our worlds. Pointing out that metaphorical truth is as distinct as is literal truth from literal falsity, Goodman shows how metaphorical referencing in buildings can also be evaluated. For instance, a Gothic cathedral that soars and sings does not equally droop and grumble. Although both descriptions are literally false, the former, but not the latter is metaphorically true.⁹

Goodman's most important contribution, however, is in the distinctions he draws between symbolic systems in general and those that can be argued to be functioning aesthetically. According to Goodman, the properties that distinguish aesthetic systems are: syntactic and semantic density, repleteness and exemplification. As symbol systems, these features are neither necessary nor sufficient for aesthetic functioning; they are indications that the item is functioning as a work of art.

Syntactic density: A work of art contains an undefined number of symbols. The symbol system that a work belongs to has an indefinite number of symbols, so that between

any two there is a third. There is no claim that all of these symbols occur within a single work. Rather the point is that if there are infinitely fine differences between symbols of the system, it is not clear exactly which symbol belongs to the work.

Syntactic repleteness: Symbols function along relatively many dimensions. That is, relatively many of their features or aspects perform symbolic functions. We cannot say that only ten, or a thousand, symbols are significant in an artwork, and the rest are superfluous. There is no feasible way to quantify the number of aspects a symbol has.

Semantic density: The field of reference of a symbol system is such that between any two reference classes there is a third. All language is semantically dense and therefore paraphrase is impossible; the problem of paraphrase stems from repleteness.

In Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's argument, the Las Vegas Strip emerges as a route of reference in which competing symbol systems—both literal and metaphorical—are open to analysis. They start with a basic analysis and identify that the Strip consists of two distinct visual systems: the obvious visual order of street elements and the difficult visual order of buildings and signs.

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Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour,
Learning from Las Vegas, 20.

They describe the two visual systems in the following passage:

The zone *of* the highway is a shared order, and the zone *off* the highway is an individual order. The elements of the highway are civic; the buildings and the 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 the 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.¹⁰

Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour are searching for a vocabulary that will allow them to explain the ambiguity and apparent chaos, underneath which lies an order not

obvious to the eye. The analysis of various building types ranging from typical hotel-casino complexes, gasoline stations, motels and service-stations to wedding chapels shows how building typologies connect to add syntactic density in the landscape, and how it is possible to discern and recognize this process of accretion. For instance, they point out that gasoline stations that one sees in Las Vegas are the typical buildings one sees in one's neighborhood and their meaning connects at that level of everyday association. While not the brightest in town, "these less bright typologies" of the gasoline stations galvanize together to form yet another layer of meaning on the Strip.

What is of interest to them is to see how buildings sited for altogether different reasons eventually conform to some discernable conventions along the Strip. Some of these discernable conventions include: perception of the moving eye, differing scales of movement along the highway, competition among the advertisers and the photogenic qualities of the Strip as a whole. Most service stations, motels and other simpler types of buildings conform to a general system of inflection toward the highway through position and form of their elements. The scales of movement and the spaces of the highway relate to distances between buildings, which are sited in a way so that they can be comprehended at high speeds. For instance, the side elevations are emphasized because they are seen by approaching traffic from a greater distance, and for a longer time than the front façade. The parking spaces also function as signs. The front parking of a typical hotel-casino complex is meant to be a token. It reassures the customer of the prestige of the complex and negotiates its presence in a way so as not to obscure the building. The real parking space is located along the sides of the complex, allowing direct access while staying visible from the highway. Through all these gestures, it becomes evident that meaning in landscape is communicated through signs and the actual distance between two points is immaterial.

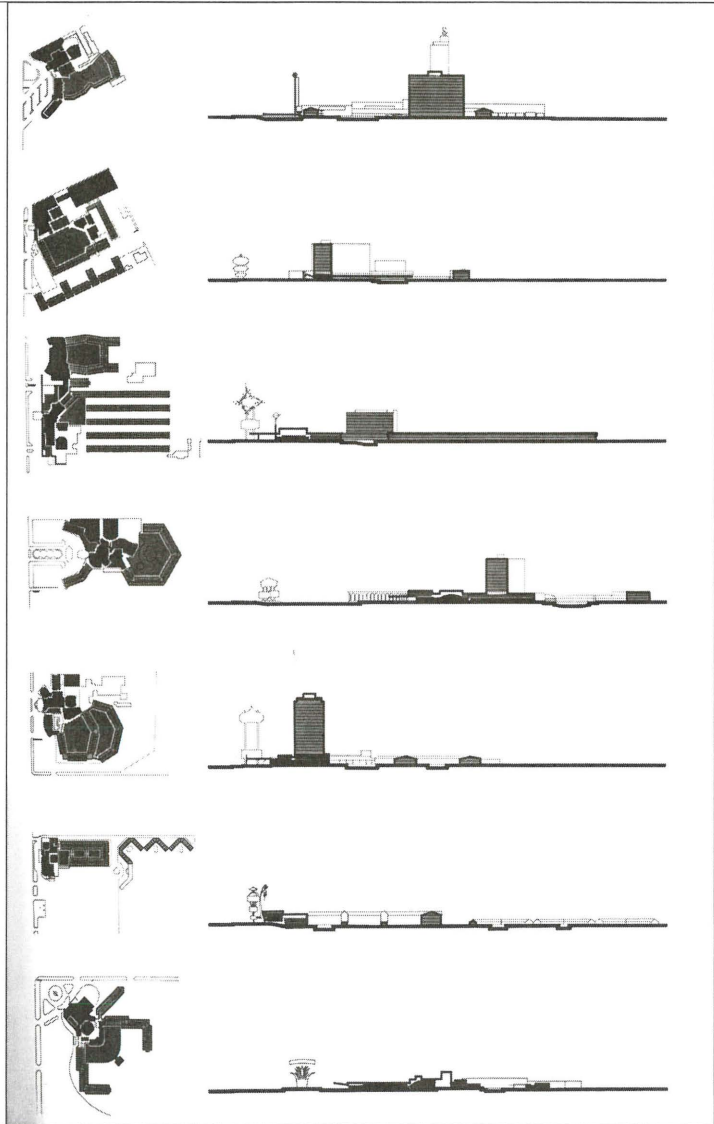


FIGURE 2 | *A Schedule of Las Vegas Strip Hotels: Plans, Sections, Elevations*

The analysis of various building types ranging from typical hotel-casino complexes, gasoline stations, motels and service-stations to wedding chapels shows how building typologies connect to add syntactic density in the landscape, and how it is possible to discern and recognize this process of accretion. In such analyses, it is evident that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour are searching for a vocabulary that will allow them to explain the ambiguity and apparent chaos, underneath which lies an order not obvious to the eye. (Figures 90, 91), p. 37.

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It is important to note that each new element adds not only to the syntactic density of the visual system, but also to its semantic density. Buildings on the Strip operate as signs—referring to the world of the highway strip—constructively exemplifying its properties of transience, superficiality, illusion, glitter and so on. The obsolescence of signs depends less on factors such as physical disintegration, and more on their location along the Strip, largely determined by the leasing system. The signs and casino facades are most changeable in the most unique and monumental parts of the Strip. Their rate of obsolescence depends more on how well they compete

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Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour,
Learning from Las Vegas, 73.

12 /
Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour,
Learning from Las Vegas, 132.

while being viewed from the moving automobile on the highway than how they relate to the building which they are part of. Furthermore, in Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's reading, a billboard/neon sign acquires repleteness through its particulars—the particular style of fonts used, neon lights, size, location, construction and innumerable qualities. All contribute to the glitter and transience and to its repleteness, which resists any form of paraphrase.

In their search for the various symbol systems, the particulars that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour identify are so many and so indistinguishable that it is impossible to distinguish and delineate smaller symbol systems and how they combine in various ways to transform the Strip in itself into a symbol. In their analysis, such a predicament about paraphrasing is evident.

On the Strip three message systems exist: the heraldic: which include all the signs that dominate the landscape; the physiognomic: the messages given by the faces of the buildings, for instance, the continuous balconies and regularly spaced picture windows of the Dunes saying "HOTEL" and the suburban bungalows converted to chapels by the addition of a steeple; and the locational—service stations are found on corner lots, the casino is in front of the hotel, and the ceremonial valet parking is in front of the casino. All three message systems are closely related on the strip, sometimes they are combined, as when the facade of a casino becomes one big sign or the shape of the building reflects its name, and the sign, in turn reflects the shape. Is the sign the building or building the sign?¹¹

Within the discipline of architecture Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour see their work to be consistent with emerging areas of inquiry, such as the search for underlying typologies and the larger search for meaning in architecture. They acknowledge the works of Charles Jencks, George Baird and Alan Colquhoun as important influences, particularly, the essays they wrote in *Meaning in Architecture*, published in 1969. E.H. Gombrich's book, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, is also cited by Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour as an important influence. Gombrich's thesis, that physiognomic forms are ambiguous, and they can only be interpreted within a particular cultural ambience is consistent with Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's belief that the symbols on the Strip conform to a conventional system of meanings—meanings that are not inherent in the forms themselves.¹²

However, what is of special interest to them is Colquhoun's interest in the typology of forms and how historical associations from the past become available to a designer's vocabulary. They write:

Alan Colquhoun has written of architecture as part of a "system of communications within society" and describes the anthropological and psychological basis for the use of a typology of forms in design, suggesting that not only are we not "free from the forms of the past, and the availability of these forms, and from the availability of these forms as typological models, but that, 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."¹³

13 / Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 131. It is important to note that in his 1967 review of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architectural Design*, Alan Colquhoun criticized Robert Venturi for failing to demonstrate the necessity for employing the formal structures adapted from past buildings. He was also critical of Venturi's Vanna Venturi House, which he said was a "learned game" in which "the self-circular semantic elements such as the string-courses and semi-circular windows" were composed in an "arbitrary grammar." Alan Colquhoun. 1967. "Robert Venturi," *Architectural Design* XXXVII (August), 362.

14 / Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 129.

Their primary aim is to rejuvenate this aspect of imaginative thought made dormant by modernist emphasis on functional aesthetics, and to devise a methodology that would allow architects to analyze and evaluate the visibly vital architecture of the Strip. They want to remind architects that "architecture that depends on association in its perception also depends on association in its creation."¹⁴ They argue that symbolism is essential to architecture and models from a previous time, or from existing cities, are source materials, and, most importantly, replication is part of

the design process. For instance, they write that when designing a window, you start not only with the abstract function of modulating light rays and breezes to serve interior space but with the image of window—of all the windows you know plus others you find out about. This approach, they argue, is symbolically and functionally conventional, but it promotes architecture of meaning, which is broader and richer.

It is the unresolved ambiguity between a belief in underlying architectural typologies and associations that are constant (that repeat themselves from the past) and the Goodmanian search for the Strip's dynamic aesthetic that is open to infinite interpretations that weakens the book's potential to provide a cohesive vision.

Moreover, what is presented in the book are a loose array of photographs, diagrams and notes on the Casino strip meant to evoke the lived experience of the Strip. The techniques of representation are varied and experimental, and it is evident that there is a search for an analytical framework that will do justice to the new emerging environment. Charts offer photographs of all sides of the main casinos and gasoline stations and 93 frames of movie sequence capture movement. Other techniques such as miscellaneous reprints of tourist brochures are also experimented within the book along with a variety of maps. All of these techniques are meant to challenge traditional two-dimensional modes of representation. However, despite the experimental edge of the whole project, a belief in abstraction is evident throughout the text and through the analytical diagrams. For instance, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour argue that it is a study of method and not content, claiming that the analysis of a drive-in church would match that of a drive-in restaurant. In fact, they believe that analysis of one architectural variable in isolation from the others is a respectable scientific and humanistic activity, so long as it is re-synthesized in design. Most of all, they clarify that they are approaching the problem of symbolism in architecture, from a practitioner's point of view, pragmatically, using concrete examples, rather than abstractly through the science of semiotic or through *a priori* theorizing.

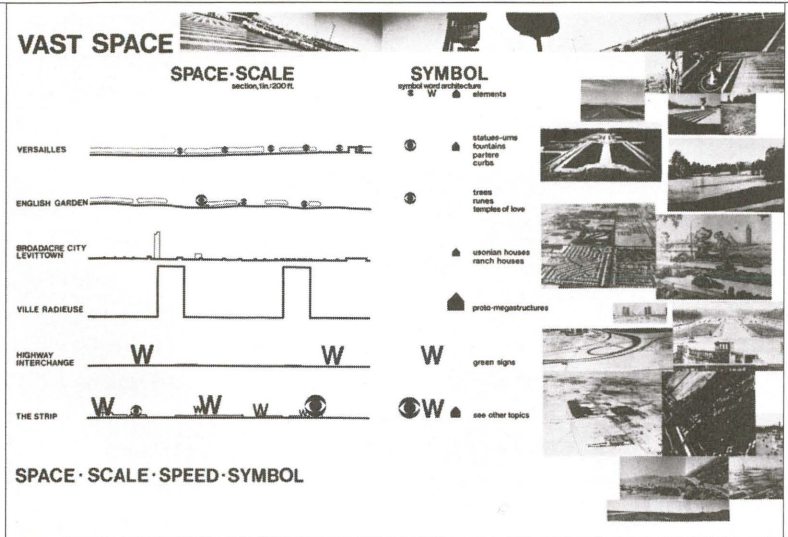


FIGURE 3 | *A Comparative Analysis of Vast Spaces*

Here the A&P parking lot is presented as a logical outcome in the evolution of vast spaces since the Versailles. The diagram compares various typologies. The various street symbols, architectural elements and space/sign ratios are diagrammatically and chronologically mapped. (Figure 24), p. 10.

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Furthermore, while the book makes a cogent argument for how past associations contribute to design, the methodology proposed in the book starts to come apart when one looks for interpretations for the study of history or for the practice of design. For instance, in one of the diagrams, the A&P parking lot is presented as a logical outcome in the evolution of vast spaces since Versailles. The diagram compares various typologies that include Versailles, the English Garden, Broadacre City Levittown, Highway Interchange and The Strip. The various street symbols, architectural elements and space/sign ratios are diagrammatically and chronologically mapped. In this comparison through history, in which one sees certain patterns disappear and others appear, a linear evolutionary paradigm is reinforced, and the architecture of small buildings and big signs emerges

as a natural consequence of evolution through history. On the other hand, the analogies drawn are completely ahistorical, for example, A&P parking lot is described as the parterre of the asphalt landscape, and grids of lamp-posts are likened to obelisks.¹⁵ It is in such analyses the book starts to lose its potential for providing a historical vision or methodological rigor.

Such frustration with the book's methodology is apparent in most reviews published at the time. While acknowledging the momentary brilliance of Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's argument, most reviewers also criticize it for failing to provide a convincing methodology. Fred Koetter's review represents one such critique:

After the fun, after the euphoria, after the diagrams and predictable points have been made, is the architect really serving society by the endorsement of such easy overtures to instant gratification? To be sure, the idea of strip development might certainly provide, by way of optimism, nimble abstraction and a variety of useful "models" for the general "structuring" of an automobile-driven urban pattern; but, at a certain point, the limits of the reference must be ascertained and the question must arise: can the literal extension of the it's-not-so-bad-if-you-look-at-it-right syndrome really transform obvious trash into a model for meaningful environment? But assuming momentarily a condition of semi-analytical detachment, what about the formal lessons of Las Vegas and its abstract lessons in "architectural communications"?...What is the architect to do with all that vitality? Is he to simulate it? Is he to run it through his analytical sieve and learn to produce less than fully animated caricatures of it? May he, in traditional way, use it to represent a version of "popular" vitality, to insinuate a recognition of front-line reality?¹⁶

On the other hand, contemporary theorists, particularly Jean Francois Lyotard, Charles Jencks, Hal Foster,

¹⁵ /
Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour,
Learning from Las Vegas, 13.

¹⁶ /
Fred Koetter. 1974. "On Robert Venturi,
Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's
Learning from Las Vegas." *Oppositions* 3,
May, 100-101.

Frederic Jameson, have all focused on the book's postmodern laissez-faire approach and rhetoric. More recently, Neil Leach in his *Anaesthetics of Architecture* has criticized it for desemanticizing and aestheticizing architectural forms. Leach writes, "Yet it is in the abstract handling of form, and their refusal to engage the context of Las Vegas, that the real problems of the book emerge. In decontextualizing the forms

of Las Vegas, they desemanticize them, setting up a pattern that is to haunt them, as we shall see, in their built-work.... It is this principle of aestheticization, then, that allows Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour to remain so oblivious to the sociopolitical questions at the heart of Las Vegas, to anaesthetize it, and to adapt an approach that is epitomized by their celebration of the advertising hoarding.”¹⁷

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Neil Leach, *The AnAesthetics of Architecture*, 63.

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Denise Scott Brown, in two articles “Leading from the Rear:” Reply to Martin Pawley, and “Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton,” argues that their approach has a strong social basis. Her concern was that architects working in a commercial society needed to be grounded in the “reality” of lower-middle-class American aesthetic values. Close study of the existing landscape might offer “formal vocabularies for today which are more relevant to people’s diverse needs and more tolerant of the untidiness of urban life than the “rationalist,” Cartesian formal orders of latter-day Modern Architecture.” Denise Scott Brown, “Leading from the Rear:” Reply to Martin Pawley (1971), in Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. 1984. *A View from the Campidoglio: Selected Essays, 1953-1984*. (Edited by Peter Arnell, Ted Bickford, and Catherine Bergart.) New York: Harper & Row, 27.

In “Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton,” Scott Brown defends herself, “We must pardon us for believing that learning to like Las Vegas for its body will help us to understand how to be gentle with the body of the South Street and hence with the lives of its occupants. From its soul too we can learn—or, to put this in the jargon Frampton prefers: from its psychosocio-politico-economic structure we may derive analytic insights into the form-content interface variables which parameterize its temporal conjoints.” At another place in the article she writes, “We use these other traditions, as others have before us, for an artistic reason; but for a social reason as well... There is social need for architectural high art to learn from and relate to folk and pop traditions if it is to serve its real clients and do no further harm in the city.” Denise Scott Brown, “Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton,” 36-37.

the recognition of the manner in which different typologies add density to the landscape and in reading the repleteness of the various symbol systems. Such an aesthetic has

In such critiques lies the predicament of the post-modern moment. Can *Learning from Las Vegas* be seen to be promoting anaestheticized advertising or can it be seen as functioning aesthetically as a transformative moment? Are there ways in which one can distinguish between when aesthetic can be said to be functioning cognitively, and when it can be said to be functioning anaesthetically—when images become insular? It is true that *Learning from Las Vegas* lacks a convincing normative framework or a broad vision. Its emphasis on creating an aesthetic awareness is intertwined with broadening social sensibility; yet the studio doesn’t necessarily address the particular socio-cultural economics of its setting.¹⁸ And then there are places in the book where image making is uncritically embraced.¹⁹ Yet *Learning from Las Vegas*’ brilliant polemic, which allows one to read the Strip as a system/systems of symbols, can be argued to be a transformative moment when one relearns to see. Venturi and Scott Brown’s call to withhold judgment does allow architects to recognize an aesthetic in the placement of neon lights, in the arrangement of parking lots, in the gasoline stations and so forth. The aesthetic does not lie in the imagery of built forms, but in the recognition of the inflexion of buildings and billboards, in the

When criticized for image making, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour defend themselves, they write, "please do not criticize us for primarily analyzing image: We are doing so simply because image is pertinent to our argument, not because we wish to deny an interest in or the importance of process, program and structure or, indeed social issues in architecture or in these two buildings. Along with most architects, we probably spend 90 percent of our design time on these other important subjects and less than 10 percent on the questions we are addressing here: they are merely not the direct subject of this inquiry." *Learning from Las Vegas*, 90-91. In "Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton," Denise Scott Brown defends LfLV again, "The separation for closer study of one variable (Las Vegas's physical form) does not imply irresponsibility to the others; it is approved scientific and humanistic behavior. Frampton should criticize if the pieces are not resynthesized in design." Her defense, however, contradicts LfLV's argument about a broader aesthetic, which contests separation of variables as a legitimate methodology.

"Our social agenda was different from the modernists. We were not promoting an explicit social agenda, but the social concerns of our project were implicit. In fact we were making the argument that in opening aesthetic sensibilities one's social concerns shift as well." Denise Scott Brown, interview with author, February 2003. See endnote 18 as well.

the potential to constantly transform; it is difficult to paraphrase. If it is possible to discern moments when aesthetic functions cognitively and when not, then it can be argued that the polemic of *Learning from Las Vegas* functions most successfully in increasing our capacity to make discriminations and learn from the everyday. More importantly, as Scott Brown claims in re-learning to accommodate the familiar, *Learning from Las Vegas* opens up our social sensibilities as well.²⁰

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