NIGEL WHITELEY

LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS... and *Los Angeles* and *Reyner Banham*

ABSTRACT

The influential British architectural historian and theorist Reyner Banham (1922-1988) belonged to the same generation as Robert Venturi (b.1925) and Denise Scott Brown (b.1931) and shared many of their architectural values. This essay shows the great similarities of value and outlook in *Learning from Las Vegas* and Banham's almost contemporaneous *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971). It then pinpoints areas of disagreement between Venturi et al. and Banham and moves to a discussion of the different authors' views on Las Vegas, drawing on other texts written by Banham around this time. It reveals that the Venturi et al. version of Las Vegas's significance was not the only one in currency in the period when *Learning from Las Vegas* appeared in its first and second editions, and that the different interpretations of Las Vegas reveal contested architectural values during the period when Modernist values were being challenged by Post-Modern ones.

Learning from Las Vegas has much in common with Banham's *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, and both reveal a permissive sensibility that is symptomatic of the time they were written. The first part of this paper looks at the shared values and parallels between the two books before moving on to significant differences of interpretation about the relationship of Pop and "high" culture. This is followed by Banham's own interpretation of Las Vegas which, while overlapping with much of Venturi et al.'s, suggests some markedly different lessons.

Challenging Orthodoxies

The sort of orthodoxy Venturi et al. and Banham challenged was expressed by Nikolaus Pevsner in *An Outline of European Architecture*, first published in 1943 and receiving its sixth edition in 1960. "A bicycle shed is a building," the introduction commences, "Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of

architecture." This distinction can be traced back to Ruskinian ideas about fundamental differences between architecture and building but, as a Modernist, Pevsner rejects Ruskin's prioritization of ornament and decoration in order to codify a twentieth century, but supposedly transhistorical, aesthetic of architecture which has three aspects:

First, [aesthetic sensations] may be produced by the treatment of walls, proportions of windows, the relation of wall-space to window-space.... Secondly, the treatment of the exterior of a building as a whole is aesthetically significant, its contrasts of block against block.... Thirdly, there is the effect of our senses of the treatment of the interior, the sequence of rooms...." Not only are the types of architectural aesthetics described as distinct categories, but they are hierarchical: it is only the third which is unique to architecture: "What distinguishes architecture from painting and sculpture is its spatial quality. In this, and only in this, no other artist can emulate the architect. Thus the history of architecture is primarily a history of man shaping space...[1]

The tendency to categorize hierarchically in order to define the supposed essentialism of a discipline was typical of other arts up to the 1960s. As regards painting, for example, Clement Greenberg, the great proponent of Abstract Expressionism and Post-Painterly Abstraction, contemporaneously with Pevsner's sixth edition of his *Outline*, published his "Modernist Painting" essay in which he proposed that the artist should seek "that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art." Painting, it followed, might be expected to concentrate on "the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment."[2] The reason for this way of thinking about the arts was not just a Victorian-like tendency for categorization, or even a desire for the operation of a certain kind of logic, rather it was because, as Greenberg argues, "it would, to be sure, narrow [a discipline's] area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of that area all the more certain."[3] That commitment to "certainty," with its quest for essentialism and purity, demanded an attitude and aes-

1 / Pevsner, Nikolaus. 1960. *An Outline of European Architecture.* London: Pelican Books, 7.

2 / Greenberg, Clement. 1960. "Modernist Painting." In O'Brian, John, editor. *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism.* Volume 4. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 86.

3 / Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 86.

LANCASTER UNIVERSITY
Visible Language 37.3
Whiteley, 314-331

© *Visible Language*, 2003
Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

thetic of exclusiveness, and rejected anything that espoused the more inclusive and immediate values of commercialism. Popular culture was summarily dismissed as "ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who [are] insensitive to the values of genuine culture...."[4] Nor did Greenberg welcome the excitingly uncertain and insecure future of the time, open as it was to the "spirit of exploration and experiment" as the pioneer Happenings artist Allan Kaprow put it.[5] In art in the 1960s, the challenge to orthodoxies included Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptual art, Land art, Environments, Happenings and Performances. In architecture, a parallel experimentation was at its most radical in projects emanating from Archigram, Cedric Price, Haus-Rucker-Co, Superstudio, Coop. Himmelblau, Eventstructures Research Group, Ant Farm, Archizoom and Experiments in Art and Technology, among others. 1972 was not only the year of the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, it also witnessed the publication of the English language edition of Jim Burns' *Arthropods: New Urban Futures*, the appropriately-named *Art Without Boundaries*, and Harold Rosenberg's *De-Definition of Art*, all symptomatic of the mood of experimentation and challenge to orthodoxies.[6]

4 / Greenberg, Clement. 1939. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." In O'Brian, John, editor. Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, volume 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 12.

5 / Kaprow, Allan. 1965. "From Assemblages, Environments and Happenings." In Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood, editors. *Art in Theory: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford: Blackwell, 708.

6 / Burns, Jim. 1972. *Arthropods: New Urban Futures*. London: Academy; Woods, Gerald, Philip Thompson, John Williams. 1972. *Art Without Boundaries: 1950-70*. London: Thames & Hudson; Rosenberg, Harold. 1972. *The De-Definition of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

7 / Krauss, Rosalind. 1979. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." In Foster, Hal, editor. 1985. *Postmodern Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 31-42. These quotes: 31.

8 / Foster, *Postmodern Culture*, 38.

The change that was occurring in the arts in the 1960s was nothing less than a paradigm shift, and is best summed up in Rosalind Krauss' phrase "the expanded field." Writing in 1979 in relation to sculpture, Krauss commented on the way that the category "sculpture" had been "kneaded and stretched and twisted" during the 1960s and '70s to the extent that it may "include just about anything"[7] from video installations, through earthworks, to minimally-material concepts – it had become "a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities."[8] Venturi et al. and Banham were doing something closely akin to this: challenging orthodoxies and thinking through differently structured possibilities so

that the dualistic division into "cathedral or bicycle shed" could become, *inter alia*, cathedral as (decorated) bicycle shed (as may apply to Venturi et al.), or even cathedral *and* bicycle shed (as Banham might have argued). Banham's two most important books of the 1960s were *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1960) and *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment* (1969). The former reassessed the contribution and importance of the Expressionist wing of Modernism that had been dismissed by historians like Pevsner in favor of the *sachlichkeit*, classical one. The latter examined the history, impact and significance of mechanical services in relation to built form, and the extent to which conventional assumptions about "architecture" might be superseded by the more inclusive concept of "fit environment for human activities."[9] Thus *Theory and Design* could, in effect, be thought of in terms of offering some alternative, radical cathedral designs from those that Pevsner had lauded, whereas *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment* would not necessarily exclude all cathedrals, but it was more likely to focus on the importance of bicycle sheds because a) they had been dismissed by previous generations of historians as unworthy of appreciation and b) they might be an intelligent and functional solution to a problem, rather than one shaped by cultural habits, traditions and customary practices.[10] Venturi was seriously challenging orthodoxies by the mid-1960s with, primarily, his call for "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" and his "Justification for a Pop Architecture." Scott Brown wrote "On Pop Art, Permissiveness and Planning" in 1969, following on from their original, controversial essay on the "Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas" published a year earlier.[11]

Learning from Las Vegas and *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies* challenged particular orthodoxies about

9 /
See Whiteley, Nigel. 2002. *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future.* Cambridge: MIT Press, chapter 4.

10 /
Banham himself did actually comment on Pevsner's distinction between Lincoln Cathedral and a bicycle shed: "Pevsner's remark is a snobbish put-down on a whole class of buildings. They are excluded from the category of architecture, not because they are ill-conceived or ugly, but because they contain bikes!" Banham, Reyner. 1973. "A real golden oldie." *New Society,* December 13, 667.

11 /
Venturi, Robert. 1965. "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture." *Perspecta,* 9-10, 17-56; Venturi, Robert. "A Justification for a Pop Architecture." 1965. *Arts and Architecture,* April, 22. Scott Brown, Denise. 1969. "On Pop Art, Permissiveness and Planning." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners,* May, 184-186. Venturi, Robert and Denise Scott Brown. 1968. "Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or *Learning from Las Vegas.*" *Architectural Forum,* March, 37-42ff.

what those cities represented. Las Vegas had been described by one eminent member of the design establishment as "...among the most brutal, degrading, and corrupt [cities] that consumer society has ever created.... [It] shows just what depths of communicative poverty can be reached by a city left to its own arbitrary development, responsive only to the needs of... casino and motel owners, and to the needs of real estate speculators."[12] Los Angeles, according to one commentator, was "...the noisiest, the smelliest, the most uncomfortable, and most uncivilized major city in the United States. In short a stinking sewer...."[13] The conventional wisdom was that the only lesson that could be learned from either city was that both rudely demonstrated the dangers of permissiveness and popular culture without the conventional controls and planning provided by supposedly responsible professionals.

Openness and inclusiveness

An attitude of openness and a commitment to inclusiveness are fundamental ingredients of both *Learning from Las Vegas* and *Los Angeles*. Both cities were characterized, according to their respective authors, by "inclusion." "...[T]he order of the Strip *includes*," wrote Venturi et al., "it includes at all levels, from a mixture of seemingly incongruous land uses to the mixture of seemingly incongruous advertising media plus a system of neo-Organic or neo-Wrightian restaurant motifs in Walnut Formica. 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...." The reward of this sort of environment was high: "vitality ... may be achieved by an architecture of inclusion...."[14] Diversity and pluralism were ends in themselves: "We think the more directions that architecture takes at this point, the better."[15] The alternative of a singular style, uniformity and order – the conventional architectural habits of thought – often resulted in an

12 / Maldonado, Tomás. 1972. *Design, Nature, and Revolution: Toward a Critical Ecology.* New York: Harper & Row, 60, 64.

13 / Raphael, Adam. 1968. Quoted in Banham, Reyner. 1973. *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies.* London: Pelican Books, 16.

14 / Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour. 1977. *Learning from Las Vegas.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 53.

15 / Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, xiii.

16 / Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 53.

overwhelming "deadness that results from too great a preoccupation with tastefulness and total design."[16] This meant that the architect and planner had to put aside their usual assumptions and even their professional taste culture. It was no good approaching Las Vegas with preconceived opinions: the architect had to suspend disbelief because, Venturi et al. argued, "withholding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything." One of the problems was that "Architects are out of the habit of looking nonjudgmentally at the environment...."[17] For all the professional's claimed open-mindedness, "there is a fine line between liberalism and old-fashioned class snobbery."[18]

That old-fashioned snobbery had also militated against Los Angeles being taken seriously by the architectural and planning professions. Books had tended to concentrate on the city's Modernist monuments by the Greene Brothers, Wright, Gill and Schindler, thereby excluding the commercial vernacular of hamburger bars and other forms of pop architecture at one extreme, and the freeway structures and other forms of civil engineering at the other. Both of these extremes, Banham argued, "are as crucial to the human ecologies and built environments of Los Angeles as are dated works in classified styles by named architects," for it is the "polymorphous architectures" which blend together to form the "comprehensible unity" that constitutes LA's identity.[19] The inclusiveness may lack order and a clearly defined form, and may even appear chaotic but, like Venturi et al. on Las Vegas, Banham wanted the visitor to LA to suspend their disbelief, otherwise he or she would experience "confusion rather than variety... because the context has escaped them...."[20] A necessary part of understanding the context was the ability to cope with movement as "the language of design, architecture, and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement.... [T]he city will never be

17 /
Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 3.

18 /
Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 155.

19 /
Banham, Reyner. 1973. *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*. London: Pelican Books, 22-23.

20 /
Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 23.

21 /
Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 23.

fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diffuse urban texture, cannot go with the flow of its unprecedented life."[21] To do so–and admit its success–Banham argued, "threatens the intellectual repose and professional livelihood of many architects, artists, planners and environmentalists because it breaks the rules of urban design that they promulgate in works and writings and teach to their students."[22] Professionals, therefore, hated LA as much as they looked down at Las Vegas. However, Banham warned, "The common reflexes of hostility are not a defense of architectural values, but a negation of them, at least in so far as architecture has any part in the thoughts and aspirations of the human race beyond the little private world of the profession."[23] LA may have lacked conventional formal cohesion, but it undeniably offered a "sense of possibilities."[24]

22 / Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 236.

23 / Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 244.

24 / Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 243.

High and pop

Both Venturi et al. and Banham upheld a "both/and" acceptance of "high" and popular culture. *Learning from Las Vegas* was not an anti-Modernist diatribe: indeed, the authors clearly stated that "Because we have criticized Modern architecture, it is proper here to state our intense admiration of its early period when its founders, sensitive to their own times, proclaimed the right revolution. Our argument lies mainly with the irrelevant and distorted prolongation of that old revolution today."[25] Banham had often expressed similar sentiments in his attempt to reform Modernism and argue for a technologically-oriented architecture in keeping with the Second Machine Age, and in Los Angeles, he devotes a chapter to "The Exiles"–principally Gill, Schindler and Neutra–and their achievement in the 1920s, which he rates alongside the achievements of the European Masters. But an acceptance of Modernism, however qualified, did not necessarily contradict a love of Pop, and it is this for which both books are mostly remembered. Banham's chapter on California "Fantastic" architecture takes in such cele-

25 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, xiii.

brated Pop buildings as Grauman's Chinese Theatre, the Aztec Hotel, Tahitian Village and Brown Derby restaurants, Johnies diner, the Jack-in-the-Box hamburger stand and Disneyland, as well as the folk monument of Watts Towers. The sources are almost wholly Pop, and demonstrate "the validity of the commercial vernacular."[26] Both authors approvingly quote Tom Wolfe's writings about signs and electrographic architecture and the shift within Pop architecture to "whole structures designed primarily as pictures or representational sculpture."[27] However, this is the point where Venturi et al. and Banham part company.

Upward, downward, sideways

"...[L]earning from popular culture," Venturi et al. explained, "does not remove the architect from his or her status in high culture. But it may alter high culture to make it more sympathetic to current needs and issues."[28] Furthermore, "We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward."[29] Venturi et al. likens this approach as similar to the Pop artists like Roy Lichtenstein who plundered popular culture such as the comic strip in order to rejuvenate fine art. Lichtenstein was still a fine artist making unique works of it, but the subject matter was popular in its source. This is the approach Venturi et al. wanted the architect to adopt because it could lead to a relevant and popular architecture which met suburbanites' aspirations and tastes. Banham saw it differently. He diagnosed a "sliding scale of commercial frugality versus cultural or aesthetic status"[30] on which,

> The lower down the scales of financial substance and cultural pretensions one goes, the better sense it apparently makes... to buy a plain standard building shell... and add symbolic garnish to the front, top, or other parts that show. It makes even better sense, of course, to acquire an existing disused building and impose your commercial personality on it with symbolic garnishes. But even if you are a major commercial operator with a chain of outlets... it still makes financial sense to put up relatively simple single-story boxes, and then make them tall enough to attract attention by piling up symbols and graphic art on top.[31]

26 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 6.

27 / Wolfe, Tom. Quoted in Banham. *Los Angeles*, 133-134; see also Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 52.

28 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 161.

29 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 3.

30 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 120.

31 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 119.

Banham was effectively describing the "decorated shed;" at the other extreme might be the "duck." But, although Banham and Venturi et al. were diagnosing the same cultural phenomenon, they drew quite different lessons. Whereas Venturi et al. wanted to use the commercial decorated shed as the model for a renewed serious architecture, Banham saw it as an end in itself. It represented a type within diversity that made up the "polymorphous architectures" of Los Angeles. Each of the different architectures existed on a continuum: all were valid and equal, and no particular one should necessarily learn from another. They were successful when they grew out of, and expressed, their own socio-cultural "ecology." Compared to this, with "high" drawing on "low," Venturi et al.'s model is vertical. At the "cultural status" end of the continuum, Banham praises the Case Study houses by Charles and Ray Eames, Craig Ellwood and Pierre Koenig that had grown out of the Miesian minimalist tradition, but which could be seen as an expression of a geographical and socio-cultural "ecology" of LA. There may be some lessons that this type of architecture could learn from commercial Pop, but they would be likely to be at the level of rethinking the home as a vehicle for a lifestyle rather than anything architecturally more radical or compromising. Fundamentally for Banham, architects' architecture should co-exist with Pop as parts of the greater whole.

Banham's "lesson" of Los Angeles, if lesson it be, was the diversity and richness of the city's "polymorphous architectures" as part of the experience of its openness and inclusiveness. While Venturi et al. implore the reader to "learn" from Las Vegas – even if this necessitated a suspension of disbelief about enjoyment of the place – Banham, on one level, really asks no more than to "enjoy" LA's "splendors and miseries... [and] graces and grotesqueries [because they] appear to me as unrepeatable as they are unprecedented...." Forget about learning from LA, he seems to be stating, because "it is immediately apparent that no city has ever been produced by such an extraordinary

32 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 24.

mixture of geography, climate, economics, demography, mechanics and culture; nor is it likely that an even remotely similar mixture will ever occur again."[32] But, of course, there is a lesson underneath the enjoyment that is that Los Angeles fundamentally challenges a deeply established professional orthodoxy:

Los Angeles emphatically suggests that there is no simple correlation between urban form and social form. Where it threatens the "human values"– oriented tradition of town planning inherited from Renaissance humanism it is in revealing how simple-mindedly mechanistic that supposedly humane tradition can be, how deeply attached to the mechanical fallacy that there is a necessary causal connection between built form and human life, between the mechanisms of the city and the styles of architecture practiced there.[33]

The lessons of Las Vegas were far more specific and transferable. Learning from Las Vegas was attempting nothing less than to "reassess the role of symbolism in architecture...."[34] In that sense, "Las Vegas is not the subject of our book. The symbolism of architectural form is."[35] Las Vegas was no more – and no less – than "a vivid initial source for symbolism in architecture. We have described in the Las Vegas study the victory of symbols-in-space over forms-in-space...."[36]

The difference between the lessons identified by Venturi et al. and Banham may be partly explained by the difference in audience for the books. Venturi et al. were writing as architects who seek "a new modesty in our designs and in our perception of our role as architects in society."[37] The reader is often assumed to be an architect for whom the lesson about architecture as symbol may transform her or his thinking about contemporary designing. *Los Angeles* was part of a series published by Pelican Books to "present the great architects, buildings and towns of the world in their social and cultural environments."[38] The readership was, therefore, wider than Venturi's – it was professional *and* lay.

33 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 237.

34 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, xvii.

35 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, xv.

36 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 119.

37 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, xvii.

38 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 1.

Las Vegas, lesson 1: enjoyment

Perhaps the different lessons can be explained by the character of the two places. Had Banham focused on Las Vegas rather than Los Angeles, he may have deduced the same lessons. Banham was not drawn to Las Vegas in the way he was to LA. In *Los Angeles*, he is condescending about Las Vegas, claiming it has become "unashamedly middle-aged," typified by the "boring Beaux-Arts Caesar's Palace...."[39] Given that Caesar's Palace forms a part of Venturi et al.'s original article of 1968 – of which Banham would obviously have been fully aware – this might be interpreted as a lack of sympathy for the Venturi et al. approach in general, and Las Vegas in particular. Indeed, he leaves his *Los Angeles* reader in no doubt that Las Vegas merits little attention compared to LA: "Las Vegas has been as much a marginal gloss on Los Angeles as was Brighton Pavilion on Regency London."[40] Banham had little more to say about Las Vegas in *Los Angeles*, but elsewhere he even finds it has interesting lessons to offer.

In 1975 Banham published an essay entitled "Mediated Environments" that dealt with the ways in which images of American building types and cities had been transmitted through the mass media. After discussing New York and Los Angeles he discusses Las Vegas, a city that only worked in image-form in "the era of Cinemascope and Technicolor."[41] He describes the city as "a classic Pop artifact, as that term had come to be understood by the end of the fifties – an expendable dream that money could just about buy, designed for immediate point-of-sale impact, outside the canons of Fine Art."[42] For his generation, he explained in another essay (1974), Las Vegas was "a self-sufficient phenomenon needing no discussion; all you had to do was point, as one would have done at the Manhattan skyline two decades earlier. However, it was also obviously the biggest ever exhibition of unalloyed Pop-art, on which visiting aesthetes could exercise fancy

39 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 124.

40 / Banham. *Los Angeles*, 124.

41 / Banham, Reyner. 1975. "Mediated Environments or: You Can't Build That Here." In Bigsby, C.W.E., editor. *Superculture: American Popular Culture and Europe*. London: Paul Elek, 78.

42 / Bigsby, *Superculture: American Popular Culture and Europe*, 78.

43 / Banham, Reyner. 1974. "Europe and American Design." In Rose, Richard, editor. *Lessons from America: An Exploration*. London: Macmillan, 88.

stylistic discriminations...."[43] Like his response to Los Angeles, the appropriate response to Las Vegas seemed to be to "enjoy" rather than "learn."

Lesson 2: "formlessness and tastelessness"

Banham suggested that a change from enjoying to learning from Las Vegas occurred when Tom Wolfe "upstaged the whole game by pointing out that the designers of the signs were horse-opera characters in string ties who knew nothing of modern art."[44] This change began in the summer of 1965 with the publication of *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby* and, Banham thought, its impact had its greatest force when it was reprinted soon after with an introduction which returned to "the Vegas theme in order to drive home what had become by then Wolfe's main preoccupation – the irrelevance of established fine-art standards of judgment to what was actually happening in America."[45] What made Las Vegas distinctive, Banham wrote in his 1975 essay, was

> ...its formlessness and tastelessness – by the standards of established culture, that is. The scatter along the strip had no discernible plan; the signs were simply commercial art raised to an intense pitch.... Whereas the great image of Manhattan had been of an undesigned but distinct form composed of designed elements of architecture, that of Las Vegas appeared to be an indistinct and undesigned formlessness composed of elements that fell below the threshold of architectural attention.[46]

To have "formlessness and tastelessness" would be a condemnation in conventional critical terms, but it is these very aspects that Banham finds attractive because they "challenge orthodoxies" and provide a "sense of possibilities" that is not based on the predictable or tried-and-tested. Venturi et al. were also sympathetic to sprawl, describing how the Strip by day "is not enclosed and directed as in traditional cities. Rather, it is open and indeterminate, identified by points in space and patterns on the ground...."[47] But they seemed concerned that the Strip in daytime "reads as chaos if you perceive only its forms and exclude its symbolic content."[48] The symbolism may have rescued it from the

44 / Rose, *Lessons from America*, 88.

45 / Banham. "Mediated Environments," 79.

46 / Banham. "Mediated Environments," 78.

47 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 116-117.

48 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 117.

49 / Banham. "Mediated Environments," 79.

chaos for Venturi et al., but for Banham it was an expression, not only of a new, alternative, non-professional aesthetic, but also a freedom: "for anyone who found anything good in the Vegas environment, established procedures of town planning and standards of aesthetic control had to be wrong. The place didn't so much flout those standards – simple opposition would have left the argument with its original polarities – it simply ignored them, which made new polarities necessary."[49] In his 1967 review of Wolfe's book, the nub of his argument was class-related: "what Wolfe had discovered in Las Vegas was the mad money of a relaxed proletariat conjuring up a culture and a visual style that had never been seen anywhere else in the world."[50] Las Vegas' "formlessness" represented an alternative to tastefulness, and an acceptance of it showed you were willing to reject "a culture based on aristocratic taste" and embrace the uncertainty and possibilities of "one based in free-form self-fulfillment...."[51] The reason for a rejection of Las Vegas' formlessness might, ultimately, be political rather than aesthetic, an "elitist suppression by a cultural Establishment."[52] Although other interpretations of the political implications of Las Vegas were in currency,[53] Banham held to his opinion that Las Vegas was a city that expressed not only a new aesthetic but also a democratic social order appropriate to the consumer capitalism of the Second Machine Age.[54]

"Formlessness and tastelessness" bring to mind Venturi et al.'s term "ugly and ordinary" in that both terms require inverted commas. The latter requires them so as to signal that they are making use of conventions which are normally dismissed by professionals as ugly and ordinary as opposed to the more aspirational "heroic and original,"[55] but they are using them in a way that "...[t]hey

50 /
Banham, Reyner. 1967. "Towards a Million-Volt Light and Sound Culture." *Architectural Review*, May, 332.

51 /
Banham, "Towards a Million-Volt Light and Sound Culture," 335.

52 /
Banham. "Europe and American Design," 88.

53 /
A diametrically opposite explanation of the social order was offered in 1972 by Tomás Maldonado, who characterised Las Vegas as a city not created "...*by* the people, *but* for the people. It is the final product... of more than half a century of masked manipulatory violence, directed toward the formation of an apparently free and playful urban environment.... But it is an environment in which men are completely devoid of innovative will and of resistance to the effects of... pseudocommunicative intoxication...." Maldonado. *Desire, Nature, and Revolution*, 65.

54 /
Banham had even acknowledged this aspect of Las Vegas in his *Los Angeles* book in which he commented that "...Los Angeles sums up a general phenomenon of US life; the convulsions in building style that follow when traditional cultural and social restraints have been overthrown and replaced by the preferences of a mobile, affluent, consumer-oriented society.... This process has probably gone further in, say, Las Vegas, yet it is in the context of Los Angeles that everyone seems to feel the strongest compulsion to discuss this fantasticating tendency." Banham. *Los Angeles*, 124.

55 /
Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 93.

are not merely ordinary but represent ordinariness symbolically and stylistically...."[56] Banham's term is also used conventionally to describe Las Vegas and, like Venturi et al., he is turning a term of abuse into a desirable attribute. However, the difference is that Venturi et al. are using "ugly and ordinary" architecture as a source for a sophisticated, high culture architecture–in the same way as a Pop artist uses sources–whereas Banham is not using "formlessness and tastefulness" as a source for high culture, but as an end in itself. The lesson is one of challenging orthodoxies and changing our paradigms of what is visually and politically acceptable and desirable. The application of the lesson of Las Vegas was "Non-Plan," a proposal for the suspension of planning in England to encourage a "plunge into heterogeneity"[57] based on the supposition that "Fremont Street in Las Vegas or Sunset Strip in Beverly Hills represent the living architecture of our age."[58]

56 / Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 129.

57 / Banham, Reyner, Paul Barker, Peter Hall and Cedric Price. 1969. "Non-Plan: an Experiment in Freedom." *New Society*, March 20, 436.

Lesson 3: virtual architecture

There was one more lesson that Banham had drawn from Las Vegas, and it is a telling one. It was elucidated in *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*, in which he declares:

> What defines the symbolic spaces and places of Las Vegas – the superhotels of The Strip, the casino-belt of Fremont Street – is pure environmental power, manifested as colored light.... [T]he fact remains that the effectiveness with which space is defined is overwhelming, the creation of virtual volumes without apparent structure is endemic, the variety and ingenuity of the lighting techniques is encyclopaedic.... And in a view of architectural education that embraced the complete art of environmental management, a visit to Las Vegas would be as mandatory as a visit to the Baths of Caracalla or La Sainte Chapelle.

Banham seems to be anticipating some of the "virtual" design in our own time but, as far as he was concerned, the "point of studying Las Vegas, ultimately, would be to see an example of how far environmental technology can be driven beyond the confines of architectural practice by designers who (for better or worse) are not inhibited by the traditions of architectonic culture, training and taste."[59]

58 / Banham et al, "Non-Plan: an Experiment in Freedom," 443.

Banham wittily and perceptively defines Las Vegas as representing a "...change from forms assembled in light to light assembled in forms..."[60] – another version of "formlessness," if not "tastelessness." His reference to "colored light" recalls the visionary architecture of Paul Scheerbart and his 1914 book *Glasarchitektur* with its call for "more colored light!"[61] Banham links Scheerbart and Las Vegas directly: the nightscape of the city, he suggests, is an example of what Scheerbart was prophesizing and had "come true in oblique ways he could never have anticipated...."[62] Scheerbart had been one of the prophets rediscovered by Banham in *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, and his stature remained high in *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*. Alongside the Futurist Antonio Sant'Elia, he represents Banham's alternative Modernist who challenged orthodoxies and offered a vision of a technologically-based architecture, underpinned by a keen "mechanical sensibility."[63]

59 / Banham, Reyner. 1969. *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*. London: Architectural Press, 269-70.

60 / Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*, 270. In his 1975 Age of the Masters he was making a similar point: "It may sound strange, almost blasphemous, to say so, but it is in Las Vegas that one comes nearest to seeing gross matter transformed into etherial substance by the power of light." 1975. *Age of the Masters: A Personal View of Modern Architecture*. London: Architectural Press, 62.

61 / Scheerbart, Paul: 1914 (reprinted 1972). *Glasarchitektur*. London: November Books, 72.

62 / Banham. *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*, 128.

63 / See Whiteley, Reyner Banham, chapter 1.

Modernism or Post-Modernism?

However reformist or radical his point of view, Banham never loses faith in Modernism, and this not only sets him apart from Venturi et al., but also explains the different lessons he draws from Los Angeles and Las Vegas. His commitment to the "mechanical sensibility" and the "technological century" led Banham to champion architects such as Buckminster Fuller, Cedric Price and Archigram. He also was a supporter of the megastructure movement and the Brutalist "bloody-mindedness" shown by Alison and Peter Smithson and James Stirling.[64] In *Learning from Las Vegas*, Venturi et al. vehemently attack

The world science futurist metaphysic, the megastructuralist mystique, and the look-Ma-no-buildings environmental suits and pods [which] are a repetition of the mistakes of another generation. Their overdependence on a space-age, futurist, or science-fiction technology parallels the machine aestheticism of the 1920s and approaches its ultimate mannerism. They are, unlike the architecture of the 1920s, artistically a deadend and socially a cop-out.[65]

To Banham, Los Angeles and Las Vegas were in the line of descent of his expanded Modernism, whereas for Venturi et al., Las Vegas could offer that lesson in architectural symbolism and communication that was a break with Modernism's heroism and individualism with its – according to Venturi et al. – misguided, inappropriate and largely implicit symbolism of industrialism.

Banham only ever referred to Venturi et al.'s work and *Learning from Las Vegas* in passing, and never offered a critical assessment of either their ideas or buildings. The closest he came was to position their 1968 essay as "Against the grain of conventional planning wisdom," remarking that Venturi et al. "applauded the profusion of shameless illuminated signs, the total independence of those signs from the architecture of the buildings from urban planning as normally understood."[66] Had that been the sum total of Venturi et al.'s project, Banham would have had no difficulty in giving it his full support but, crucially, he makes no reference to the reason for their study or the chief lesson they drew from it.

That he did not discuss these lessons can be explained by his consistent opposition to Post-Modernism – or at least about what he caricatured as Post-Modernism. The basis of his opposition was that Post-Modernism "exists chiefly as a series of smart graffiti on the bodies of fairly routine modern buildings. It is all outward show and could be removed, in most cases, without destroying the utility of the rather ordinary buildings behind the jesting facades."[67] He intensely disliked what he saw as the "cleverness" shown by Post-Modern architects whom he lists as including Robert Stern, Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves and Venturi who are "liable to make heavy weather and great polemical bother about every historical quote they use." He acknowledged that "It looks terrific on the page, but often tawdry on the site, as does much American Post-Modernism.... But what's it all got to do with 'real architecture'?"[68]

64 /
Whitely, Reyner Banham, 249-253.

65 /
Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 149.

66 /
Banham, "Mediated Environments," 80.

67 /
Banham, Reyner. 1978. "The Writing on the Walls." *Times Literary Supplement*, November 17, 1937.

68 /
Banham, Reyner. 1981. "The Ism count." *New Society*, August 27, 362.

69 /
Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 6.

"Real" architecture, presumably, belonged to the Modernist preoccupation with "forms-in-space" which dismissed the Venturi et al. idea of "symbols-in-space" as the sign of a bad lesson. For Venturi et al., "billboards are almost all right."[69] Banham thought they were all right too, in their place, but he probably preferred cathedrals and bicycle sheds.

AUTHOR NOTE

NIGEL WHITELEY *is Professor of Visual Arts in the department of Art at Lancaster University. His critically-acclaimed book on* Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future *was published by the MIT Press in 2001. Other recent publications include essays in De-Traditionalisation and Art (2000), Utility Reassessed (1999), Interpreting Visual Culture (1999), and Modernism, Gender and Culture (1997). Whiteley has been a visiting professor at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, the Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay and the Central Academy of Art and Design in Beijing.*