

SIGNS TAKEN FOR WONDERS¹

ABSTRACT

My essay reexamines *Learning from Las Vegas* semiotic presentation of architectural symbolism. First, I argue that the attempt to approach architectural symbols technically, outside their socioeconomic context, overlooks important aspects of signs' functioning. Second, I use visual and verbal metaphors that designers and viewers apply to buildings to suggest that empathetic and embodied meanings are essential to architecture's symbolism. These kinds of meanings were vividly manifested in the "heroic and original" buildings that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour dismiss.

— To look back at *Learning from Las Vegas* after thirty years evokes complex reactions. Unlike many other books of similar age, this one has never really left us. Its vigorous defense of architectural ornament, its equation of architecture with communication and its evocative labels

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I have borrowed my title from Franco Moretti's 1983 book on the sociology of literary forms.

"duck" and "decorated shed" all remain current. At the same time, to reduce the book to these familiar elements is to miss much of its richness and complexity. This brief text contains a first-rate study of urban morphology written in the context of mid-twentieth-century discussions of urban community and "imageability," an analysis of the role of ornament and symbolism in architecture and, building on these, a treatise on contemporary design.

Learning from Las Vegas was a milepost on two divergent roads, one leading to a populist celebration of architecture as it was, the other toward a highly theorized view of architecture as it ought to be. I vividly remember the excitement that greeted its publication (particularly of the widely disseminated, revised paperback edition) among those interested in the everyday landscape. In the climate of the 1970s, the work was welcomed as a telling polemic against cultural hierarchies, an affirmation of popular culture, and a Whitmanian (or Ginsbergian) cel-

ebriation of the energy and messiness of American life and landscape. It is still known and read outside architecture on these terms.

Yet while *Learning from Las Vegas* seems to celebrate popular tastes, particularly in its angry defense of the culture of the “silent white majority,” its message is not that straightforward. Remember that Las Vegas was only “almost all right” (a phrase Robert Venturi first used in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* in the same way he used it in *Learning from Las Vegas*).² Venturi and his co-authors Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour never intended to cast aside cultural hierarchies, only to remodel them.³ Just before the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* was published, Scott Brown took pains to emphasize “the agony in our acceptance of pop,” declaring that “we are part of a high art, not a folk or popular art, tradition.”⁴ In *Learning from Las Vegas* Venturi and his colleagues claimed high-art status through an intricate, even convoluted, polemical game built around outsider and insider positions. They attacked modernists’ insider aesthetics by appealing to outsiders’ tastes, while their own declared immersion in

popular aesthetics positioned them as the true insiders and their modernist targets as clueless outsiders. Thus they seized the high ground of high-art architecture by a surprise attack along the low road, using their pop-culture raw materials skeptically, instrumentally and ironically to define a new path for high art, as the Pop artists whom they admired had done.⁵

The ambivalence at the heart of the book—Scott Brown’s “agony”—is encapsulated in the famous categorization of commercial buildings as *ducks*, in which “the architectural systems of space, structure and program are submerg-ed and distorted by the overall symbolic form,” or

2 /
Venturi, Robert. 1966. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 102. Emphasis added.

3 /
Learning from Las Vegas has three principal authors, but I will often use Venturi’s name as a shorthand term to stand for all three.

4 /
Scott Brown, Denise. 1971. “Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton.” In *A View from the Campidoglio: Selected Essays, 1953-1984*. Arnell, Peter, Ted Bickford, & Catherine Bergart, editors. New York: Harper & Row, 34, 37.

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Venturi, Robert. 1977. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. 2d ed. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 44; Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. 1977. *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* [hereafter cited as LLV]. Rev. ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 100, 105, 130; Scott Brown. “Pop Off,” 37; Venturi, Robert. 1978. “A Definition of Architecture as Shelter with Decoration on It, and Another Plea for a Symbolism of the Ordinary in Architecture.” In *A View from the Campidoglio*, 63.

decorated sheds, where “systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is ap-

6 /
LLV, 87.

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LLV, 137. Other aspects of LLV are indebted to the discussion of urban form and meaning centered around the work of Kevin Lynch. Scott Brown's early essay “The Meaningful City” is important for understanding the place of LLV in urbanist debates. (Scott Brown, Denise, 1965.

“The Meaningful City,”
AIA Journal 43:1, 27-32.)

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For example in Alan Colquhoun's essay “Typology and Design Method,” which Scott Brown acknowledged several times and which prefigures some of the important arguments about architectural symbolism that find their way into LLV. (Colquhoun, Alan. 1967. “Typology and Design Method.” In *Meaning in Architecture*. Jencks, Charles and George Baird, editors. New York: George Braziller, 266-77.)

plied independently of them.” Ducks, Venturi tells us, were named after the Long Island Duckling, a roadside food stand illustrated in Peter Blake's *God's Own Junkyard*.⁶ Many readers remember the book as a celebration of such buildings, which were the improvised, whimsical, one-off products of small businesspeople. However, the large-scale signs of the Las Vegas Strip that the Venturi group studied were not those kinds of buildings, but better-financed, more carefully calculated commercial structures produced by a firm that had been designing and building signs since the 1920s. Thus two aspects of popular culture—the idiosyncratic creations of the self-dramatizing entrepreneur and professionally designed and fabricated corporate advertising—were conflated under the heading of “Pop,” as examples of non-elite taste.

But *Learning from Las Vegas* is not a study of roadside architecture per se. It was embedded in a particular mid-century architectural discussion, as architects and historians reassessed pre-war modernism. Venturi and his colleagues used the label duck and decorated shed to enter into an attack on “orthodox Modern architecture” that had been going on since the early 1950s.⁷ In fact, the first work seriously to confront the modernist assumptions that *Learning from Las Vegas* questioned so acerbically was not found along American commercial strips but in Marseilles, at Chandigarh and at Ronchamp. Le Corbusier's work played a central role as object lesson and case study in the debate to which Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour contributed. It is remarkable how often Ronchamp, in particular, figures, directly or by implication, in the literature that they cite.⁸ The Swiss architect hovers over *Learning from Las Vegas*, coming clearly into view only in the brief set piece on the descendants of La Tourette. Yet the chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp haunts the pages of *Learning from*

Las Vegas as a kind of ghostly presence, manifest by implication whenever the “heroic and original” is invoked. As I will suggest later in the essay, our understanding of the implications and limitations of Venturi’s particular vision for architecture, which blended 1960s cultural pluralism with ideas borrowed from linguistics and semiotics that were beginning to transform many humanistic disciplines in the 1960s and 1970s, can benefit bringing the visceral architecture of Ronchamp into full view as an alternative to *Learning from Las Vegas*’s sign-saturated polemic. Notre Dame du Haut stands as the quintessential duck next to Venturi’s decorated sheds.

The ambivalence about ducks and decorated sheds—the fondness for ducks along the road but their rejection as high architecture—is one of many that structure and fracture *Learning from Las Vegas*. The book is ironic in the technical sense that its narrative repeatedly starts down one path then turns away from it, raises one set of issues, then lays them aside, makes an observation then ignores it.⁹ These turnings and turnings back are a sign of the

“agony,” but also, frankly, an attempt to preempt all possible lines of criticism. Thus the first half of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the study of urban morphology, explores many facets of the experience of the Strip, from signage to light levels to relationships between parking lots and buildings, night and day, interior and exterior, desert heat and air conditioning. The dazzling multiplicity of the city is evident in the large-format first

edition, with its plethora of charts, graphs, maps and colored photographs that in some senses mimic the city’s sensory profusion. But these are laid aside in the second half, and even suppressed in the monochrome revised edition, with its new subtitle “The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form.”¹⁰ After all, “Las Vegas is not the subject of our book... [It is] a treatise on symbolism in architecture.”¹¹

Still, Las Vegas refuses to go away, for although Venturi began to develop the theoretical ideas put forth in *Learning from Las Vegas* and in many other venues years

9 /
de Man, Paul. 1996. “The Concept of Irony.” In *Aesthetic Ideology*. Warminski, Andrzej, editor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 178–82. Thanks to Aron Vinegar for directing me to this essay.

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I am indebted to Michael Golec for this insight.

11 /
Scott Brown, Denise. 1977. “Preface to the Revised Edition.” LLV, xv.

before the Las Vegas studio, the choice of the Strip as a laboratory colored the argument in critical ways, as Karsten Harries has observed.¹² According to Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, modernist architects deny architecture's symbolic function while seeking meaning in an unacknowledged way, through their "heroic and original" expressionist massing. But such abstract architecture is barren because it rejects architecture's rich heritage of symbolically charged conventional forms (meaning applied visual elements) that tap into deeply rooted social and cultural references and associations.¹³

To the modernists' strained efforts to achieve individual expression through dramatic massing, Las Vegas offers the counterexample of a legible architecture that works through the familiar and the obvious. The Strip is a commercial landscape. Its big signs strive, in Venturi's words, for "bold communication rather than... subtle expression."¹⁴ In fact, the entire Strip is "an architecture of communication over space."¹⁵ Venturi refined this statement a few pages later, describing the Strip as "symbol in space rather than form in space."¹⁶

While the Las Vegas of Part I was a dizzying cacophony of messages competing for the driver's attention, it was not chaotic. Rather, it was a "difficult" multiple order, unlike the oversimplified, single order of the modernist city. Individual parts might clash, but they all worked according to some fairly straightforward principles. So the Strip (and their own agenda) seduced Venturi and his colleagues and students into thinking that, like a sign, architecture has a relatively clear message to convey, one that can be transmitted most easily and most cheaply by words on signs rather than by "deformed" buildings—by a sign proclaiming "I AM A MONUMENT" standing on an ordinary building rather than by a monumental or heroic and original building.¹⁷ Architecture is text.

The passing years have turned what might originally have been a strategic observation

12 / Harries, Karsten. 1997. *The Ethical Function of Architecture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 78, 81.

13 / LLV, 7, 101. The claim of impoverishment derives from Ernst Gombrich by way of Alan Colquhoun. (Colquhoun. "Typology and Design Method," 274.)

14 / LLV, 9.

15 / LLV, 8.

16 / LLV, 13.

17 / LLV, 149.

18 / Venturi, Robert. 1996. *Iconography and Electronics upon a Generic Architecture: A View from the Drafting Room*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 55, 13.

into a central conviction. Venturi now calls for “a generic architecture of surface” whose “electronic surfaces can be defined as sources of light... acknowledging a 24-hour architecture of now.”¹⁸ After thirty years of claiming that Las Vegas was merely a formal case study, Venturi now envisions it as our permanent condition. Architecture is television.

Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour modified their initial, overly simple description of architectural symbolism in the course of the famous comparison of their firm’s

19 /
LLV, 100-1.

20 /
Harries, *Ethical Function*, 70, 78. Harries makes a similar point in arguing that Venturi mentions the role of architecture in the “articulation of space” but not in setting the tone for social action. (Harries, *Ethical Function*, 81.)

Guild House with Paul Rudolph’s Crawford Manor. There they parsed architecture’s communicative properties in now-familiar terms borrowed from semiotics, stressing the paired qualities of denotation, which “indicates specific meaning” (such as the casino sign’s fundamental message, “Stop here” or “Spend your money here”) and connotation, which “suggests general meanings” that are embedded in the forms of the signs.¹⁹ These general meanings are “associative,” based on past experience and social consensus, and set the social tone of the actions to be held under its banner or the context in which the primary message is to be understood. Architecture is language.

While it might seem odd at first glance that the prophets of complexity and contradiction should reduce architecture to such a straightforward communicative function—to what Harries calls “literary architecture” or “architecture as text”—it appears less strange if we understand that much of their celebration of complexity is devoted to architecture’s visual qualities, or what used to be called formal analysis, and not to its signification.²⁰ In this respect *Complexity and Contradiction* is more complex and contradictory than *Learning from Las Vegas*, where the communicative or “symbolic” function of architecture is treated as a relatively simple matter.

Was the 1960s Strip a purely visual, message-conveying environment? Is architecture a text? What message did it convey? In what manner? Is architecture a language? The emphasis on “conventional” decoration throughout

Learning from Las Vegas as well as the choice of an explicitly commercial setting as a laboratory allow the reader

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These assumptions are founded in the work of Fernand de Saussure. For a discussion of their impact on the plastic and visual arts, see Elkins, James. 1999. *The Domain of Images*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 55; Summers, David. 1991. "Conditions and Conventions: On the Disanalogy of Art and Language." In *The Language of Art History*. Kemal, Salim and Ivan Gaskell, editors. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 185-90, 194-96.

22 |

LLV, 53.

23 |

Lefebvre, Henri. 1984. *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 90; Upton, Dell. 1998. *Architecture in the United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 33-35, which builds on Campbell, Colin. 1987. *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumption*. Oxford: Blackwell; and Miller, Daniel. 1987. *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford: Blackwell.

to overlook these questions, since the answers seem so obvious. For a work subtitled *The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, *Learning from Las Vegas* offers remarkably little analysis of "symbolism" or of the ways "form" symbolizes. The semiotic theories to which it alludes assume that signs are arbitrary and conventional vehicles for communicating "meaning."²¹

Meaning floats free of any particular relationship to objects, denoting and connoting whatever we agree that it will. So conventional meanings only become conventional in a social setting and they only "mean" when employed in other social settings.

This inherently social quality of signs makes it difficult to sustain the asocial,

purely technical analysis of signs or symbols that the authors vehemently insist on undertaking.

As so often in this work, though, insights that are mentioned but not pursued offer the possibility of other views of architecture's symbolic functions. In one such passage, Venturi remarks that

The Strip shows the value of symbolism and allusion in an architecture of vast space and speed and proves that people, even architects, have fun with architecture that reminds them of something else, perhaps of harems or the Wild West in Las Vegas, perhaps of the nation's New England forebears in New Jersey.²²

The Las Vegas that Venturi and his co-authors describe so eloquently and accurately "reminds [visitors] of something else," offering, then drawing back, the possibility that one might visit harems, the Wild West or the palaces of the Caesars. Here they allude to a fundamental process of modern life, the creation of consumer desire. Feeling a void that cannot be described, we seek an intangible palliative that cannot exist, but settle for a tangible surrogate that *can* be bought. With each new acquisition, the intangible takes another step back and another purchase is necessary.²³

This view of the signs is very different from the relatively monodirectional communication process that *Learning from Las Vegas* so often presents as it addresses the architects who must create decorated sheds. Here, “subtle expression” – even tact and delicacy – rather than “bold communication” is essential. The link between the desired but intangible – a new identity as the cure for one’s felt inadequacy – and the tangible but available – a new setting or new possessions – must be implied rather than stated. Consumers are too sophisticated to believe that a real harem, Virginia City saloon or Roman triclinium lie behind the casino’s doors. They understand that

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Arthur C. Danto has commented on Las Vegas’s dazzling layers of authenticity and inauthenticity. (Danto, Arthur C. 2001. “Degas in Vegas.” In *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in Pluralistic Art World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 351-59.)

no such direct exchange is possible. The ironic disruptions – the continual oscillation of the discourse from intangible to tangible, from fantasy to transaction – make it possible for the game to continue. Its terms are conveyed by the physical and visual qualities of Las Vegas’ signs: their distortions of scale, “improper” use of classical detail and contextual discord tell us that Caesar’s Palace is *and* is not Caesar’s palace.²⁴

The art historian David Summers labels this process of being/not being *substitution*, a game in which all the players agree that the thing at hand will stand for a desired

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Summers, David. 1991. “Real Metaphor: Towards a Redefinition of the ‘Conceptual’ Image.” In *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*. Bryson, Norman, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey, editors. New York: HarperCollins, 241, 243, 245.

but absent object.²⁵ The substitute – the Strip’s classical portico or miniature Eiffel Tower – is useful only to the extent that it is manifestly not that for which it stands. The difference between original and substitute cues our understanding of the present situation in a way that is even richer than if the

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Summers, “Conditions and Conventions,” 204-5; italics in the original.

original itself were present.²⁶ In this kind of “communication,” interpretation is at least as important as initial assertion. “Symbolism” is transaction rather than representation, and a sign reading “I am a monument” does not necessarily communicate any less ambiguously than a heroic and original building.

Is an architectural theory that takes the signs of the Strip as models satisfactory, then? If the kind of applied symbolism exemplified by signs and decorated sheds creates

the most accessible kind of architecture and best represents the taste of the “silent white majority,” why is it that ducks appear to capture the popular imagination?²⁷ Tellingly, the recent transformation and taming of the Strip, now renamed Las Vegas Boulevard, de-emphasized pure signs in favor of miniature Eiffel Towers, overblown Sphinxes, glass Pyramids and compressed Grand Canals—corporate reinterpretations of roadside ducks—as Venturi and Scott Brown themselves observed in a perceptive essay that chronicled a return visit to Las Vegas in the 1990s.²⁸

27 /
LLV, 153; Scott Brown, Denise. 1971. “Learning from Pop.” In *A View from the Campidoglio*, 26-27; Scott Brown. “Pop Off,” 35.

28 /
Venturi, Robert and Denise Scott Brown. 1996. “Las Vegas after Its Classic Age.” In *Iconography and Electronics*, 126. Something like the classic Venturian Strip survives in Las Vegas along the Boulder Strip, now a down-scale residential and commercial district for Latino workers.

The reworking of the Strip demands a reexamination of the claims set out in *Learning from Las Vegas*. Does an “architecture of meaning” always include a message?²⁹ And is architecture’s significance so easily divorced from its materiality? The duck says, “No!”

Here we might turn back to the heroic and original modernist architecture that *Learning from Las Vegas* denounces. Recall that the authors dismiss “orthodox Modern architecture” as lacking in content, as a result of its overly personal formal vocabulary. Let us start with the very dramatic example of such heroic and original architecture: Le Corbusier’s Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut (1951-53) at Ronchamp, France.

Le Corbusier was severely chastised for his challenge to Modernist orthodoxy two decades before *Learning from*

29 /
Venturi, Robert and Denise Scott Brown. 1969. “Learning from Lutyns: Reply to Alison and Peter Smithson.” In *A View from the Campidoglio*, 20.

30 /
Stirling, James. 1956. “Ronchamp: Le Corbusier’s Chapel and the Crisis of Rationalism.” *Architectural Review* 119, 160-61; Tzonis, Alexander. 2001. *Le Corbusier: The Poetics of Machine and Metaphor*. New York: Universe, 176.

Las Vegas appeared. The architect James Stirling famously saw the chapel as a symptom of “the crisis of rationalism,” while the critic Giulio Argan and the architect Ernesto Rogers debated whether Le Corbusier was attempting to “go ‘beyond the rational’” or to plunge directly into the irrational at Ronchamp.³⁰ The renowned historian

Nikolaus Pevsner labeled Ronchamp as “the most discussed monument of the new irrationalism” and bitterly denounced Le Corbusier’s “revolt from reason” for the “mid-century irresponsibility” and frivolity evident in architecture such as that of the Brazilian mod-

ernist Oscar Niemeyer.³¹ Yet in their polemic, Venturi and his colleagues conflate the kind of rationalist functionalism that Stirling defended and Colquhoun criticized with its expressionist antithesis at Ronchamp. Together they were the “heroic and original” “orthodox Modern architecture,” with its paucity of conventional imagery or “symbolism” that Venturi set out to demolish.

The testimony of its architect and of critics and visitors, however, casts Notre Dame du Haut in a very different light. Le Corbusier and his assistants reported that they envisioned the roof as a crab shell, a boat, a ski jump, a

water sluice and an aircraft wing.³² Based on this testimony, Danièle Pauly depicted Le Corbusier’s design process as one that dredged these images from conscious and unconscious memory and worked them into sculptural, architectural form—into an “architectural symphony.”³³ Far from being irrational or lacking “content” in its abstraction, Notre Dame du Haut overflows with concrete, everyday images. These have nothing obvious to do with the function or denotative meanings of the building, but were ways for Le Corbusier and his staff to think from their experience in the world to the project at hand.³⁴

The contemporary architect Frank Gehry describes his working method in similar terms. Gehry, who is known for creating dramatic sculptural buildings that would certainly earn them Venturi’s label “heroic and original,” says that he begins by “looking for the image” through sketching and that he frequently works from everyday objects such as bottles, snakes, fish, boats and horses’ heads.³⁵ Even in the Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao, Spain, a work comparable in expressionist abstraction to the chapel at Ronchamp, the architect and his assistants described elements of the design as “bootlike,” and “sail-like.” One corner was a “ship’s bow,” while the crowning element was the “flower.”³⁶

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Pevsner, Nikolaus. 1970. *An Outline of European Architecture*. 7th ed., rev. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 426-29.

32 |

Tzonis. Le Corbusier, 181; Curtis, William J. R. 1986. *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms*. New York: Phaidon, 179-80; Evans, Robin. 1995. *The Projective Cast: Architecture and Its Three Geometries*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 305.

33 |

Pauly, Danièle. 1987. “The Chapel of Ronchamp as an Example of Le Corbusier’s Creative Process.” In *Le Corbusier*. Brooks, H. Allen, editor. Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 132-34; Pauly, Danièle. 1997. *Le Corbusier: La Chapelle de Ronchamp / The Chapel at Ronchamp*. Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier; Basel: Birkhäuser, 122 (quote).

34 |

They may also have had a connotative function in that by naming the images Le Corbusier and his assistants established the modern context in which they wanted this religious structure to be understood.

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Lindsey, Bruce. 2001. *Digital Gehry: Material Resistance / Digital Construction*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 7, 23, 82; van Bruggen, Coosje. 1999. *Frank O. Gehry. Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 40, 42.

In both cases, of course, the concrete images were thoroughly transformed, even dissolved, in the course of the design process when they were subjected to the distinctly unsymbolic operations necessary to create usable, buildable structures. Gehry's poetic and metaphoric images become standing buildings thanks to sophisticated computers and their expert programmers.³⁷ Similarly, Robin

36 /
Van Bruggen, *Frank O. Gehry*, 36, 52.

37 /
Lindsey, *Digital Gehry*, 48-89.

38 /
Evans, *Projective Cast*, 293, 306-8.

Evans detailed the particular contribution of the engineering-drawing technique of ruled surfaces to the development of the final design of Le Corbusier's chapel.³⁸ The results were not ducks in the roadside sense, whatever their starting points. Nevertheless,

whether or not the architects' accounts of their design processes are "true" or complete, their resort to such visual images is significant. The architects "see" a variety of ordinary objects even in the most abstract buildings.

Just as architects may begin with iconic images, viewers often seek such images in an unfamiliar building, although they may or may not see the same images that its architects cite. The aesthetician John Alford, an early analyst of Ronchamp, explicitly acknowledged his search for such icons: "In order to make the building and its aesthetic more intelligible to myself I found myself looking for analogies with other monuments, architectural or sculptural." He thought Ronchamp's resemblance to a Neolithic dolmen tomb and to a ship particularly compelling, but assumed that these were part of Le

39 /
Alford, John. 1958. "Creativity and Intelligibility in Le Corbusier's Chapel at Ronchamp." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16:3, 302-4.

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Stirling. "Ronchamp," 155; Tzonis. *Le Corbusier*, 181; Evans, *Projective Cast*, 305-6, 317 (quotes); Jencks, Charles. 1973. *Le Corbusier and the Tragic View of Architecture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 152.

Corbusier's intent—to fuse a "symbolic fortress and tomb" with the "Ship of Life or of the Soul."³⁹ This would make them connotative symbols in the Venturian sense. Most visitors are less driven to find theological messages in Ronchamp's appearance. They have compared the chapel's towers to thumbs, pots, "an industrialized farm silo or a nautical vent duct," and the whole building to "men holding up a boat," Noah's Ark, "bits of broken china thrown on top of the hill," a dove, a sitting duck, a monk's hood, a nun's cowl, praying hands and, as Alford did, a ship.⁴⁰ Some of these connote

modernity or function, but others (the sitting duck, the china) are metaphors of absurdity or of absent meaning.

In the light of such analogies, we may take issue with Venturi's claim that "Allusion and comment, on the past or present or on our great commonplaces or old clichés, and inclusion of the *everyday* in the environment, sacred and profane . . . are lacking in present-day Modern architecture."⁴¹ Architects and viewers do find such allusions

41 | in modern buildings, but they rarely see
LLV, 53. them (*pace* Alford) as denotative statements

and not always as connotative ones. So we might ask, particularly of the meaningless images, whether they have "symbolic content," even if they do not communicate Venturian messages.

One way to think about this question would be to turn from the sober world of high architecture at Ronchamp and Bilbao to the light-hearted and irreverent landscape defined by the nicknames that lay people give to specific

buildings. These constitute a kind of visual-verbal play that ranges through a wide variety of buildings of many ages and many types. For the most part, this play is free of the pervasive publicity and journalistic canonization that colors our reactions to instant monuments such as Ronchamp or Bilbao.⁴²

Of a highly unscientific sample of almost 200 such names, two thirds pun or otherwise play on the physical aspects of the building.⁴³ They append a concrete visual image such as those we have encountered at Ronchamp and Bilbao to a building's abstract architectural form, metaphorically moving the nicknamed building into a new context, often to the building's disadvantage.⁴⁴ The greatest number of nicknames compared a building to another object, almost always a smaller, more mundane object, based on the shape, color or

materials of the structure. Thus the shape of the office building at 885 Third Avenue in New York prompted the nickname Lipstick Building. It is complemented by the

42 |
For example, Muschamp, Herbert. 1997.
"The Miracle at Bilbao." *New York Times*
Magazine, Sept. 7, 56-59, 72, 82.

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Most of these nicknames were collected by way of a call for contributions on the e-lists of the Consortium of Art and Architectural Historians and the Society of Architectural Historians for contributions. The project garnered 185 different nicknames (discounting minor variations) for 143 different nineteenth- and twentieth-century European, North and South American and Australian buildings. Others were collected through personal encounters, verbal reports from acquaintances and library and Internet research. Interestingly, there were no African buildings and only a few Asian ones submitted. Slightly fewer than one third of the nicknames were based on word play, meaning that they punned or otherwise manipulated the name of the building or building owner or the function of the building, as in "the Orifice" for The Oracle shopping mall in Reading, England.

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Seventy of the nicknames were *clearly* derogatory (many others probably were) while only two were clearly admiring.

Lipstick and Compact Case (or Lipstick and Powder Puff), the 1961 additions to the ruined Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedachtnis-Kirche in Berlin. The Fernsehturm, a broadcasting tower in Berlin is Tele-spargel (Tele-asparagus) or the Toothpick. A housing project in Sydney and Jerome L. Greene Hall at Columbia University in New York are both known as the Toaster. A roof that looks like a partly opened shell earned the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin the label Schwangere Auster (Pregnant Oyster). The Monument to Vittorio Emmanuele II in Rome is variously known as the Torta Nunziale (Wedding Cake), Macchina da Scrivere (Typewriter), and the Dentures. Montreal's Olympic Stadium is the Giant Toilet Bowl, while Norman Foster's new Swiss Re Tower in London, not yet finished, is already called the Erotic Gherkin.

The most striking nicknames compare buildings to ordinary household appliances (St. Mary Maytag, the Lemon Squeezer, the Washing Machine, the Blender)⁴⁵ or to

foods (Tortenstück/the Slice of Cake, the Corncobs, the Golden Cabbage, the Durian, the Space Strudel).⁴⁶ All of these names reimagine monumental buildings as everyday items that are normally used or consumed by

people. They transform the human-architectural scale relationship into a distorted human-object relationship.

Human scale is evoked even more directly when nicknames compare buildings to human beings or parts of human beings. The tall antennae atop the BellSouth Building in Nashville distinguish the Batman Building. The linked, distorted towers of Gehry's Nationale-Niederlanden Building in Prague are thought to resemble Fred Astaire clutching Ginger Rogers, hence the Ginger

and Fred Building. Der lange Eugen, a nickname for a twenty-nine-story Parliamentary Office Building in Bonn, refers to Eugen Gerenmaier, the president of the Bundestag at the time the building

was constructed, and a man of short stature. Bowman's Erektion for the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, the Prick on the Plains for Bertram

45 /

For St. Mary's Cathedral, San Francisco; St. Engelbert's Church, Cologne; the Calakmul Building, Mexico City; and the Mexicana Airlines Tower, Mexico City, respectively.

46 /

For the Museum of Modern Art, Frankfurt; Marina City, Chicago; the Secession Building, Vienna; the Esplanade-Theaters on the Bay, Singapore; and the Austrian Cultural Forum, New York, respectively.

Goodhue's Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln, Hoover's Last Erection for the Hoover Tower at Stanford University and the Gentialia for the juxtaposition of the Sky Dome and the CN Tower in Toronto all use phallic metaphors to comment on the ambitions of architects and patrons.⁴⁷

Building nicknames recontextualize through substitution. While Le Corbusier and Gehry subordinated images to the final product, viewers of those buildings projected their own images onto them to understand and "tame" (or dismiss) these idiosyncratic buildings. Nicknames aim to destabilize architecture by what seventeenth-century English poets called a metaphysical conceit (or image), one that links two unlikely things in a way that casts at least one of them into an unexpected light. As one informant wrote of two particularly striking nicknames, "Now try ridding your mind" of them when viewing the buildings.⁴⁸

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John G. Bowman was the University of Pittsburgh chancellor who promoted the construction of the Cathedral of Learning. Surprisingly few nicknames employ sexual innuendoes as these do.

Architectural nicknaming is a metaphorical gesture that is grounded in architecture's materiality, specificity and place-rootedness. Building on the Greek root of "metaphor," which means to transfer something from one place to another, David Summers has stressed the relationality and spatiality inherent in visual (including architectural) metaphors. They are "real metaphors" whose significance derives from substitutions within the

48 /
Benjamin Harvey, personal communication, Aug. 22, 2002.

49 /
Summers, "Real Metaphor," 245-46; Summers, "Conditions and Conventions," 184.

realm of mass and extension that we occupy and, just as importantly, from the context within which substitution is made. In his words, "Substitutes are effective in the space in which they are put because they are only 'real' in that space...we cannot interpret them without giving equal attention to their correlative spaces."⁴⁹ Summers's real metaphors are serious and sincere while building nicknames are playful and ironic. His substitutions turn pumpkins into coaches, but building nicknames turn coaches into pumpkins.

Architectural nicknames are irreverent but rarely angry or demeaning. Even the many that are disparaging

usually have a good-humored tone about them. Their playfully subversive substitution of images carries us back to the roadside ducks that *Learning from Las Vegas* named so memorably and that the authors equated with heroic and original architecture. A duck is a building intentionally shaped like another object or group of objects: no imaginative projection is necessary. Most often the image represents a mundane object of daily use—

a clam box, a milk bottle, a coffee pot, a miner's hat, an automobile tire—or an object of literal consumption—a chicken, an artichoke, a hot dog, a donut. Occasionally the building resembles a human being. In other

words, ducks are explicit representations of the same kinds of objects that the nicknames project onto non-iconic buildings.

Ducks, inhabitable sculptures, are one subcategory of the large body of colossi (and miniatures), ranging from civic monuments to roadside attractions, that populate the landscape.⁵⁰ In civic monuments, this scale shift often has a connotative intent. The adjacent Jefferson and Franklin D. Roosevelt memorials in Washington, D.C., are a case in point. The colossal statue of Jefferson, raised on a high pedestal, and the near-life-size, pedestalless figures of FDR imply very different relationships between the great men and ordinary viewers. A roadside duck is intended to attract motorists' attention and to suggest the goods and services offered, but presumably not to imply that humans are mere pipsqueaks compared to domesticated fowl. Yet in the cases of both the memorials and the commercial structures, the viewer is invited to experience the dislocation and disorientation that arises from finding oneself, like Alice in Wonderland, in an unfamiliar relationship to familiar things. Building nicknames offer the same defamiliarization, suggesting that the city itself has become a kind of funhouse (which is not necessarily a bad thing).

The incorporation of concrete images into the processes of designing and experiencing Le Corbusier's and Gehry's buildings, the nicknaming of a Batman Building or a Durian and a roadside entrepreneur's construction

50 /
See Marling, Karal Ann. 1984. *The Colossus of Roads: Myth and Symbol along the American Highway*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

of a giant duck or donut are linked as playful exercises that manipulate the relationship between self and environment symbolically. In some cases Venturian communication enters into the process. When Alford reads theological content into Ronchamp, both connotative and denotative messages are invoked. And architectural nicknames surely connote one's attitude toward a particular structure.

In framing architectural symbolism under the rubric of language, however, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour are among those who, argues Pierre Bourdieu, fall so thoroughly under the spell of the language they use that they would reduce all cultural acts to propositions and messages. "Language spontaneously becomes the accomplice of this hermeneutic philosophy which leads one to conceive action as something to be deciphered, when it leads one to say, for example, that a gesture or ritual *expresses* something, rather than saying quite simply, that it is 'sensible' (*sensé*) or, as in English, that it 'makes' sense."⁵¹ For Bourdieu, there is a sense of "rightness," of being in tune, involved in such actions that is partly somatic and that cannot be reduced to a denotative or connotative proposition.

Instead, it might be more appropriate to cast language into the realm of architecture, of the material, of what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call "embodied realism." According to Lakoff and Johnson, we succeed in the world by sorting things into categories, simplifying differences and lumping our experience as much as possible into "basic-level categories," a kind of categorical least-common-denominator. They go on to argue that as the products of embodied minds actively and corporeally engaged in our surroundings, most of our basic-level categories are based on comparisons with and relationships to our bodies. Our figurative speech is rich with metaphors founded in these body-based, relational categories.⁵²

An important aspect of architectural symbolism, then, lies in the metaphorical relationships that it proposes between bodies and buildings. Metaphor, wrote Donald

⁵¹ /
Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*.
Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 36-37.

⁵² /
Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 1999.
*Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind
and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New
York: Basic Books, 17-18, 27, 30-38.

Davidson, is the “dreamwork of language...”⁵³ It has no hidden or other meaning—no message outside itself to which it points, no content that can be paraphrased.⁵⁴ The mundane iconic images and correspondences architects and viewers employed at Ronchamp and Bilbao were strategies for fitting these “abstract” modern buildings into their own embodied frames of reference. They symbolized the builders’ relationships to the world as builders and viewers imagine it, a test that took the form of Summers’s metaphorical substitution.

53 / Davidson, Donald. 1978. “What Metaphors Mean.” In *On Metaphor*. Sacks, Sheldon, editor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 29.

54 / Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” 43. Noël Carroll makes the same point with respect to visual metaphors. (Carroll, Noël. 2001. “Visual Metaphor.” In *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 355, 365.)

The anthropologist Dan Sperber, writing at about the time *Learning from Las Vegas* was published, denied that symbolism is “the semiotic minus language.” “Symbols are not signs. They are not paired with their interpretations in a code structure. Their interpretations are not meanings.” The meaning of symbols is “absent meaning.” Instead, symbolism represents knowledge about knowledge. It is a way of affirming what we think we know about what we know. That is, the power of symbolism lay not in its transmission of a message, but in its ritual, visual or verbal enactment of relationships that we believe to be true, what is “right” or “makes sense,” in Bourdieu’s phrasing.⁵⁵

55 / Sperber, Dan. 1975. *Rethinking Symbolism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1, 51-85 (quote).

It is not necessary, then, to discard language when we argue that architecture is neither a language nor a text. We simply need to acknowledge that even our verbal encounters with architecture depend on our fundamental, embodied engagement with our material surroundings, an engagement based not simply on looking at signs but on immersion in a multi-dimensional landscape.⁵⁶

56 / On the verbal component of visual metaphors, see Carroll, “Visual Metaphor,” 359.

So space cannot be discounted as easily as Venturi and his colleagues do. Even the automobile traveler along the Las Vegas Strip of thirty years ago was immersed in a large-scaled, changing environment in which his or her relationship to objects constantly shifted as signs loomed

and streamed by, one after the other.⁵⁷ Venturi's term "automobile scale" obscures the fact that such giant signs

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It seems to me that, as they so often do, Venturi and his colleagues acknowledge this in part I of LLV and ignore it in part II.

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Henkin, David. 1998. *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York*. New York: Columbia University Press, explores the ways in which antebellum New York was a city inscribed with texts at all scales, while Rubin, Barbara. 1979. "Aesthetic Ideology and Urban Design." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69, 339-61, discusses ducks before the automobile.

and giant architectural objects were part of the world long before the automobile came onto the scene because they were toys in a more important and more pervasive game than selling, one that *symbolizes* human being in the world.⁵⁸ This is why ducks are so popular and it may be why they are replacing decorated sheds in modern Las Vegas, as corporate-sponsored architects strive to emulate the kind of visual and spatial play that

freelance roadside merchants engaged in so fluently seventy years ago.

Learning from Las Vegas is a monument in the history and theory of American architecture, but it is also a sign marking a curious turning point for the field. The expressive buildings produced by architects such as Le

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Corbusier, Niemeyer, Rudolph and Eero Saarinen in the 1950s and 1960s explored the embodied relationships between people and their environments, their dramatic gestural forms eliciting a kind of somatic empathy from the viewer. In rejecting this kind of heroic and original architecture (for some very good reasons) and in using the results of their own field research so selectively, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour set architecture on a road away from the material toward

the cerebral. *Learning from Las Vegas*, along with *Complexity and Contradiction* (both issued in revised editions in 1977), inaugurated the period of high theory in architecture. *Complexity and Contradiction's* reliance on modes of literary criticism and the communications model employed in *Learning from Las Vegas* were instrumental in delivering American architectural theory into the linguistic bondage from which it has yet to be liberated. Although Venturi and Scott Brown dislike being connected with their postmodern successors, the arbitrariness of "conventional" form that they championed undeniably opened the door for an architecture in which

a billboard proclaiming "I am a monument" attached to a box could be perfectly acceptable, and they opened another door to the wordiness and immateriality of contemporary theory. Since the 1960s, exploration of architecture's materiality has been left to artists such as Dan Flavin, Gordon Matta-Clark, Dan Graham and Rachel Whiteread.

To reconsider *Learning from Las Vegas* through the lens of the architecture that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour rejected is not to call for a return to the heroic and original or to ignore the (unspecified) constraints that they claim make such an architecture impractical or inappropriate to our times. Rather, it is to turn the authors' call to learn from the entire landscape back on them. The lesson of the heroic modernists, the smart-aleck building namers and the duck-builders is that architectural meaning encompasses more than a one-way process of "communicating" and "symbolizing." Architecture is not language. Architecture is not a text. Architecture is not television.

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AUTHOR NOTE

DELL UPTON is Harrison Professor of Architectural History and Anthropology at the University of Virginia. His most recent book is *Architecture in the United States (1998)*, in the *Oxford History of Art* series.

