LEARNING
FROM
LAS VEGAS
Revised Edition

Robert Venturi  Denise Scott Brown  Steven Izenour
LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS
LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS: THE FORGOTTEN SYMBOLISM OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The first part of this book is a description of our study of the architecture of the commercial strip. Part II is a generalization on symbolism in architecture and the iconography of urban sprawl from our findings in Part I.

"Passing through Las Vegas is Route 91, the archetype of the commercial strip, the phenomenon at its purest and most intense. We believe a careful documentation and analysis of its physical form is as important to architects and urbanists today as were the studies of medieval Europe and ancient Rome and Greece to earlier generations. Such a study will help to define a new type of urban form emerging in America and Europe, radically different from that we have known; one that we have been ill-equipped to deal with and that, from ignorance, we define today as urban sprawl. An aim of this study will be, through open-minded and nonjudgmental investigation, to come to understand this new form and to begin to evolve techniques for its handling."

So started the introduction to a studio we conducted at the Yale School of Art and Architecture in the fall of 1968. It was, in fact, a research project, undertaken as a collaboration among three instructors, nine students of architecture, and two planning and two graphics students in graduate programs at Yale. The studio was entitled "Learning from Las Vegas, or Form Analysis as Design Research." Toward the end of the semester, as the spirit of Las Vegas got to them, the students changed the second name to "The Great Proletarian Cultural Locomotive."

We spent three weeks in the library, four days in Los Angeles, and ten days in Las Vegas. We returned to Yale and spent ten weeks analyzing and presenting our discoveries. Before this, we authors had visited Las Vegas several times and written "A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas" (Architectural Forum, March 1968); this formed the basis for the research program that we drafted during the summer of 1968. We divided the work into twelve topics, to be assigned to individuals or small groups, and into five phases, including Phase III, "Applied Research," in Las Vegas. The first part of this book contains our original article augmented by the findings of the research project. Unfortunately, with twelve or so people, we were not able to cover all the research topics we had programmed, nor did we have available time or data to cover other subjects adequately. There is still a wealth of architectural information to be culled from Las Vegas. In addition, some of the emphases that were important to the studio we have not stressed in this book; for example, our pedagogical interest in evolving the traditional architectural "studio" into a new tool for teaching archi
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. Similarly we have no argument with the many architects today who, having discovered in practice through economic pressure that the rhetoric of architectural revolution would not work, have jettisoned it and are building straightforward buildings in line with the needs of the client and the times. Nor is this a criticism of those architects and academics who are developing new approaches to architecture through research in allied fields and in scientific methods. These too are in part a reaction to the same architecture we have criticized. We think the more directions that architecture takes at this point, the better. Ours does not exclude theirs and vice versa.

Our more formal but heartfelt thanks for help with the studio go to Avis Car Rental, Las Vegas; The Celeste and Armand Bartos Foundation; Dennis Durden; the Honorable Oran Gragson, Mayor of Las Vegas; Dr. David Henry, Clark County Administrator; Hertz Car Rental, Las Vegas; George Izenour; Philip Johnson; The Edgar J. Kaufmann Foundation; Alan Lapidus; Morris Lapidus; National Car Rental, Las Vegas; The Osabaw Island Project; The Nathaniel and Marjorie Owings Foundation; The Rohm and Haas Company, Philadelphia; the staff, Clark Country Planning Commission; the staff, Las Vegas City Planning Commission; U.C.L.A. School of Architecture and Urban Planning; Yale Reports; The Young Electric Sign Company, Las Vegas; and to all the people in and around the Yale School of Art and Architecture who pitched in and helped, especially Gert Wood; and to Dean Howard Weaver, Charles Moore, and Yale University, none of whom found it odd that Yale architects could have serious purposes in Las Vegas, and who picked up the tab when our meager sources of funding had been exhausted.

Our thanks also go to the students whose skill, energy, and wit fueled the great cultural locomotive and gave it its special character and who taught us how to live it up and learn in Las Vegas.

For the writing of the book, we thank the Edgar J. Kaufmann Foundation and the Celeste and Armand Bartos Foundation, both of which helped us a second time; the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a federal agency created by an Act of Congress, 1965; our firm, Venturi and Rauch, especially our partner, our Rauh of Gibraltar, for his sometimes grudging but always crucial support and for the sacrifices a small office makes when three of its members write a book; we thank Virginia Gordan and Dan and Carol Scully for their help and advice with the illustrations; and Janet Schenier and Carol
Rauch for typing the manuscript. And finally Steven Izenour, who is our co-worker, co-author, and sine qua non.

Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi Calivigny Island, W. I.

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

This new edition of Learning from Las Vegas arose from the displeasure expressed by students and others at the price of the original version. Knowing that a second printing of the original version would be almost twice the original price, we have chosen instead to abridge the book to bring its ideas within the reach of those who would like to read it. At the same time, we have taken the opportunity to focus our argument more clearly and to add a little, so the new edition, although abridged, stands on its own and goes beyond its progenitor.

The main omissions are the final section, on our work, and about one-third of the illustrations, including almost all in color and those in black and white that could not be reduced to fit a smaller page size. Changes in format further reduce costs, but we hope that they will serve too, to shift the book’s emphasis from illustrations to text, and to remove the conflict between our critique of Bauhaus design and the latter-day Bauhaus design of the book; the “interesting” Modern styling of the first edition, we felt, belied our subject matter, and the triple spacing of the lines made the text hard to read.

Stripped and newly clothed, the analyses of Part I and the theories of Part II should appear more clearly what we intended them to be: a treatise on symbolism in architecture. Las Vegas is not the subject of our book. The symbolism of architectural form is. Most alterations to the text (aside from corrections of errors and changes to suit the new format) are made to point up this focus. For the same reason we have added a subtitle, The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form. A few more changes were made, elegantly, we hope, to “de-sex” the text. Following the saner, more humane custom of today, the architect is no longer referred to as “he.”

This is not a suitable place to respond to our critics, but, as we intend to augment as well as to abridge, I shall list our replies made in other places.

Allegations that in studying Las Vegas we lacked social responsibility and concern are answered in an article entitled “On Architectural Formalism and Social Concern; a Discourse for Social Planners and Radical Chic Architects.”

Since Learning from Las Vegas was written, the lights of Las Vegas have gone out for a spell and Americans’ confidence in the automobile and other resources has been rocked in the first of possibly many crises. High energy expenditure and urban wastefulness are not central to our arguments for symbolic architecture and receptivity to other people’s values; I tried to show why in an interview in On Site on Energy.

Robert Venturi’s note on attribution in the first edition, with its request for fairness to his co-authors and co-workers, was virtually ignored by almost all reviewers. Personal pique at the cavalier handling of
my contribution and at attributions in general by architects and journalists led me to analyze the social structure of the profession, its domination by upper-class males, and the emphasis its members place upon the architectural star system. The result is an article entitled “Sexism and the Star System in Architecture.”

Source information on these and other articles may be found in the Venturi and Rauch bibliography which has been added to this edition. This list of writings by members of the firm and others is the most complete we have. We welcome information on anything we have omitted.

Since the publication of this book our thoughts on symbolism in architecture have been developed through several different projects. The Yale architecture studio that gave rise to Learning from Las Vegas was followed the next year by a study of architectural symbolism in residential suburbia, entitled “Remedial Housing for Architects, or Learning from Levittown.” This material forms part of “Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City,” a Bicentennial exhibition we designed for the National Collection of Fine Arts of the Smithsonian Institution at the Renwick Gallery. In similar vein, an article, “Symbols, Signs and Aesthetics: Architectural Taste in a Pluralist Society,” comments on the social content of architectural symbolism and on the relation of architects to the different taste cultures of our society; and another, “Architecture as Shelter with Decoration on It,” amplifies our theories on symbolism.

Questions of architectural pedagogy were of great concern in the two Yale projects but were merely hinted at in Learning from Las Vegas. In this revised version the parallel text of studio notes has been removed to a separate section and keyed to the Part I text. In this form it reestabishes something of its original identity. Further thoughts on architectural pedagogy, research, and studio are expounded in an article entitled “On Formal Analysis as Design Research, with Some Notes on Studio Pedagogy.”

Publications on our architectural work are listed in the bibliography. Fairly recent broad-scale coverage has been given our firm in two issues of Japanese Architecture and Urbanism.

In the nine years since our study was initiated, Las Vegas and the Strip have changed too. Some buildings have new wings and restyled facades. Some signs are no longer there. Delicate and intense neon high readers have given way to bland, white, plastic, rear-illuminated message boards that alter the scale and vitality of Strip ornament. Portes cocheres now vie with signs as bearers of symbolic information.

We sense that the ideas initiated in Learning from Las Vegas are receiving much greater acceptance than when they were first published. We feel too that architects, bar a few diehards, are coming to realize that what we learned from Las Vegas, and what they by implication should learn too, is not to place neon signs on the Champs Elysées or a blinking “2 + 2 = 4” on the roof of the Mathematics Building, but rather to reassess the role of symbolism in architecture, and, in the process, to learn a new receptivity to the tastes and values of other people and a new modesty in our designs and in our perception of our role as architects in society. Architecture for the last quarter of our century should be socially less coercive and aesthetically more vital than the striving and bombastic buildings of our recent past. We architects can learn this from Rome and Las Vegas and from looking around us wherever we happen to be.

Denise Scott Brown
West Mount Airy, Philadelphia
PART I
A SIGNIFICANCE FOR A&P PARKING LOTS, OR LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS
§ A SIGNIFICANCE FOR A&P PARKING LOTS, OR LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS

"Substance for a writer consists not merely of those realities he thinks he discovers; it consists even more of those realities which have been made available to him by the literature and idioms of his own day and by the images that still have vitality in the literature of the past. Stylistically, a writer can express his feeling about this substance either by imitation, if it sits well with him, or by parody, if it doesn't."

Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things.

The commercial strip, the Las Vegas Strip in particular—the example par excellence (Figs. 1 and 2)—challenges the architect to take a positive, non-chip-on-the-shoulder view. Architects are out of the habit of looking nonjudgmentally at the environment, because orthodox Modern architecture is progressive, if not revolutionary, utopian, and puristic; it is dissatisfied with existing conditions. Modern architecture has been anything but permissive: Architects have preferred to change the existing environment rather than enhance what is there.

But to gain insight from the commonplace is nothing new: Fine art often follows folk art. Romantic architects of the eighteenth century discovered an existing and conventional rustic architecture. Early Modern architects appropriated an existing and conventional industrial vocabulary without much adaptation. Le Corbusier loved grain elevators and steamships; the Bauhaus looked like a factory; Mies refined the details of American steel factories for concrete buildings. Modern architects work through analogy, symbol, and image—although they have gone to lengths to disclaim almost all determinants of their forms except structural necessity and the program—and they derive insights, analogies, and stimulation from unexpected images. There is a perversity in the learning process: We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward. And with holding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything.

§ COMMERCIAL VALUES AND COMMERCIAL METHODS

Las Vegas is analyzed here only as a phenomenon of architectural

§ See material under the corresponding heading in the Studio Notes section following Part I.

1. The Las Vegas Strip, looking southwest

2. Map of Las Vegas Strip
communication. Just as an analysis of the structure of a Gothic cathedral need not include a debate on the morality of medieval religion, so Las Vegas’s values are not questioned here. The morality of commercial advertising, gambling interests, and the competitive instinct is not at issue here, although, indeed, we believe it should be in the architect’s broader, synthetic tasks of which an analysis such as this is but one aspect. The analysis of a drive-in church in this context would match that of a drive-in restaurant, because this is a study of method, not content. Analysis of one of the architectural variables in isolation from the others is a respectable scientific and humanistic activity, so long as all are reanalyzed in design. Analysis of existing American urbanism is a socially desirable activity to the extent that it teaches us architects to be more understanding and less authoritarian in the plans we make for both inner-city renewal and new development. In addition, there is no reason why the methods of commercial persuasion and the skyline of signs analyzed here should not serve the purpose of civic and cultural enhancement. But this is not entirely up to the architect.

BILLBOARDS ARE ALMOST ALL RIGHT

Architects who can accept the lessons of primitive vernacular architecture, so easy to take in an exhibit like “Architecture without Architects,” and of industrial, vernacular architecture, so easy to adapt to an electronic and space vernacular as elaborate neo-Brutalist or neo-Constructivist megastructures, do not easily acknowledge the validity of the commercial vernacular. For the artist, creating the new may mean choosing the old or the existing. Pop artists have relearned this. Our acknowledgment of existing, commercial architecture at the scale of the highway is within this tradition.

Modern architecture has not so much excluded the commercial vernacular as it has tried to take it over by inventing and enforcing a vernacular of its own, improved and universal. It has rejected the combination of fine art and crude art. The Italian landscape has always harmonized the vulgar and the Vitruvian: the contorni around the duomo, the partiere’s laundry across the padrone’s portone, Supercomeromaggiore against the Romanesque apse. Naked children have never played in our fountains, and I. M. Pei will never be happy on Route 66.

ARCHITECTURE AS SPACE

Architects have been bewitched by a single element of the Italian landscape: the piazza. Its traditional, pedestrian-scaled, and intricately enclosed space is easier to like than the spatial sprawl of Route 66 and

ARCHITECTURE AS SYMBOL

Los Angeles. Architects have been brought up on Space, and enclosed space is the easiest to handle. During the last 40 years, theorists of Modern architecture (Wright and Le Corbusier sometimes excepted) have focused on space as the essential ingredient that separates architecture from painting, sculpture, and literature. Their definitions glory in the uniqueness of the medium; although sculpture and painting may sometimes be allowed spatial characteristics, sculptural or pictorial architecture is unacceptable—because Space is sacred.

Purist architecture was partly a reaction against nineteenth-century eclecticism. Gothic churches, Renaissance banks, and Jacobean manors were frankly picturesque. The mixing of styles meant the mixing of media. Dressed in historical styles, buildings evoked explicit associations and romantic allusions to the past to convey literary, ecclesiastical, national, or programmatic symbolism. Definitions of architecture as space and form at the service of program and structure were not enough. The overlapping of disciplines may have diluted the architecture, but it enriched the meaning.

Modern architects abandoned a tradition of iconology in which painting, sculpture, and graphics were combined with architecture. The delicate hieroglyphics on a bold pylon, the archetypal inscriptions of a Roman architrave, the mosaic processions in Sant’Apollinaire, the ubiquitous tattoos over a Giotto Chapel, the enshrined hierarchies around a Gothic portal, even the illusionistic frescoes in a Venetian villa, all contain messages beyond their ornamental contribution to architectural space. The integration of the arts in Modern architecture has always been called a good thing. But one did not paint on Mies. Painted panels were floated independently of the structure by means of shadow joints; sculpture was in or near but seldom on the building. Objects of art were used to reinforce architectural space at the expense of their own content. The Kolbe in the Barcelona Pavilion was a foil to the directed spaces: The message was mainly architectural. The diminutive signs in most Modern buildings contained only the most necessary messages, like LADIES, minor accents begrudgingly applied.

ARCHITECTURE AS SYMBOL

Critics and historians, who documented the “decline of popular symbols” in art, supported orthodox Modern architects, who shunned symbolism of form as an expression or reinforcement of content: meaning was to be communicated, not through allusion to previously known forms, but through the inherent, physiognomic characteristics of form. The creation of architectural form was to be a logical process, free from images of past experience, determined solely by program and structure.
with an occasional assist, as Alan Colquhoun has suggested, from intuition.

But some recent critics have questioned the possible level of content to be derived from abstract forms. Others have demonstrated that the functionalists, despite their protestations, derived a formal vocabulary of their own, mainly from current art movements and the industrial vernacular; and latter-day followers such as the Archigram group have turned, while similarly protesting, to Pop Art and the space industry. However, most critics have slighted a continuing iconology in popular commercial art, the persuasive heraldry that pervades our environment from the advertising pages of The New Yorker to the billboards of Houston. And their theory of the "debasement" of symbolic architecture in nineteenth-century eclecticism has blinded them to the value of the representational architecture along highways. Those who acknowledge this roadside eclecticism denigrate it, because it flouts the cliché of a decade ago as well as the style of a century ago. But why not? Time travels fast today.

The Miami Beach Modern motel on a bleak stretch of highway in southern Delaware reminds jaded drivers of the welcome luxury of a tropical resort, persuading them, perhaps, to forgo the gracious plantation across the Virginia border called Motel Monticello. The real hotel in Miami alludes to the international styliness of a Brazilian resort, which, in turn, derives from the International Style of mid-Century. This evolution from the high source through the middle source to the low source took only 30 years. Today, the middle source, the neo-Eclectic architecture of the 1940s and the 1950s, is less interesting than its commercial adaptations. Roadside copies of Ed Stone are more interesting than the real Ed Stone.

§ SYMBOL IN SPACE BEFORE FORM IN SPACE:
LAS VEGAS AS A COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

The sign for the Motel Monticello, a silhouette of an enormous Chippendale highboy, is visible on the highway before the motel itself. This architecture of styles and signs is antispacial; it is an architecture of communication over space; communication dominates space as an element in the architecture and in the landscape (Figs. 1-6). But it is for a new scale of landscape. The philosophical associations of the old eclecticism evoked subtle and complex meanings to be savored in the docile spaces of a traditional landscape. The commercial persuasion of roadside eclecticism provokes bold impact in the vast and complex setting of a new landscape of big spaces, high speeds, and complex programs.


THE ARCHITECTURE OF PERSUASION

Styles and signs make connections among many elements, far apart and seen fast. The message is basically commercial; the context is basically new.

A driver 30 years ago could maintain a sense of orientation in space. At the simple crossroad a little sign with an arrow confirmed what was obvious. One knew where one was. When the crossroads becomes a cloverleaf, one must turn right to turn left, a contradiction poignantly evoked in the print by Allan D'Arcangelo (Fig. 7). But the driver has no time to ponder paradoxical subtleties within a dangerous, sinuous maze. He or she relies on signs for guidance—enormous signs in vast spaces at high speeds.

The dominance of signs over space at a pedestrian scale occurs in big airports. Circulation in a big railroad station required little more than a simple axial system from taxi to train, by ticket window, stores, waiting room, and platform—all virtually without signs. Architects object to signs in buildings: "If the plan is clear, you can see where to go." But complex programs and settings require complex combinations of media beyond the purer architectural triad of structure, form, and light at the service of space. They suggest an architecture of bold communication rather than one of subtle expression.

§ THE ARCHITECTURE OF PERSUASION

The cloverleaf and airport communicate with moving crowds in cars or on foot for efficiency and safety. But words and symbols may be used in space for commercial persuasion (Figs. 6, 28). The Middle Eastern bazaar contains no signs; the Strip is virtually all signs (Fig. 8). In the bazaar, communication works through proximity. Along its narrow aisles, buyers feel and smell the merchandise, and the merchant applies explicit oral persuasion. In the narrow streets of the medieval town, although signs occur, persuasion is mainly through the sight and smell of the real cakes through the doors and windows of the bakery. On Main Street, shop-window displays for pedestrians along the sidewalks and exterior signs, perpendicular to the street for motorists, dominate the scene almost equally.

On the commercial strip the supermarket windows contain no merchandise. There may be signs announcing the day's bargains, but they are to be read by pedestrians approaching from the parking lot. The building itself is set back from the highway and half hidden, as is most of the urban environment, by parked cars (Fig. 9). The vast parking lot is in front, not at the rear, since it is a symbol as well as a convenience. The building is low because air conditioning demands low spaces, and merchandising techniques discourage second floors; its architecture is neutral because it can hardly be seen from the road. Both merchandis-
3. Dunes Casino and Hotel, Las Vegas

4. Wedding chapel, Las Vegas

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* A comparative analysis of directional spaces
and architecture are disconnected from the road. The big sign leas to connect the driver to the store, and down the road the cake mixes and detergents are advertised by their national manufacturers on enormous billboards infleted toward the highway. The graphic sign in space has become the architecture of this landscape (Figs. 10, 11). Inside, the A&P has reverted to the bazaar except that graphic packaging has replaced the oral persuasion of the merchant. At another scale, the shopping center off the highway returns in its pedestrian malls to the medieval street.

§ VAST SPACE IN THE HISTORICAL TRADITION
AND AT THE A&P

The A&P parking lot is a current phase in the evolution of vast space since Versailles (Fig. 12). The space that divides high-speed highway and low, sparse buildings produces no enclosure and little direction. To move through a plaza is to move between high enclosing forms. To move through this landscape is to move over vast expansive texture: the megatecture of the commercial landscape. The parking lot is the parterre of the asphalt landscape (Fig. 13). The patterns of parking lines give direction much as the paving patterns, curbs, borders, and tapis vert give direction in Versailles; grids of lamp posts substitute for obelisks, rows of urns and statues as points of identity and continuity in the vast space. But it is the highway signs, through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, their particular positions in space, their reflected shapes, and their graphic meanings, that identify and unify the megatecture. They make verbal and symbolic connections through space, communicating a complexity of meanings through hundreds of associations in few seconds from far away. Symbol dominates space. Architecture is not enough. Because the spatial relationships are made by symbols more than by forms, architecture in this landscape becomes symbol in space rather than form in space. Architecture defines very little: The big sign and the little building is the rule of Route 66.

The sign is more important than the architecture. This is reflected in the proprietor's budget. The sign at the front is a vulgar extravaganza, the building at the back, a modest necessity. The architecture is what is cheap. Sometimes the building is the sign: The duck store in the shape of a duck, called "The Long Island Duckling," (Figs. 14, 15) is a sculptural symbol and architectural shelter. Contradiction between outside and inside was common in architecture before the Modern movement, particularly in urban and monumental architecture (Fig. 16). Baroque domes were symbols as well as spatial constructions, and events are bigger in space and higher outside than inside in order to dominate their urban setting and communicate their symbolic message. The false fronts of
VAST SPACE

SPACE · SCALE

VERSAILLES

ENGLISH GARDEN

BROADACRE CITY
LEVITTOWN

VILLE RADIEUSE

HIGHWAY INTERCHANGE

THE STRIP

SPACE · SCALE · SPEED · SYMBOL

12. A comparative analysis of vast spaces
14. "The Long Island Duckling" from Land's Own Junkyard

15. Big sign-little building or building as sign

SCALE SPEED SYMBOL

- Persuader to enclosed space
- Space divider with civic messages
- Complex-space connector
- Ambiguous backdrop
- Vast-space persuader
- Vast-space connector
Western stores did the same thing: They were bigger and taller than the interiors they fronted to communicate the store's importance and to enhance the quality and unity of the street. But false fronts are of the order and scale of Main Street. From the desert town on the highway in the West of today, we can learn new and vivid lessons about an impure architecture of communication. The little low buildings, gray-brown like the desert, separate and recede from the street that is now the highway, their false fronts disengaged and turned perpendicular to the highway as big, high signs. If you take the signs away, there is no place. The desert town is intensified communication along the highway.

FROM ROME TO LAS VEGAS

Las Vegas is the apotheosis of the desert town. Visiting Las Vegas in the mid-1960s was like visiting Rome in the late 1940s. For young Americans in the 1940s, familiar only with the auto-scaled, gridiron city and the antiurban theories of the previous architectural generation, the traditional urban spaces, the pedestrian scale, and the mixtures, yet continuities, of styles of the Italian piazzas were a significant revelation. They rediscovered the piazza. Two decades later architects are perhaps ready for similar lessons about large open space, big scale, and high speed. Las Vegas is to the Strip what Rome is to the Piazza.

There are other parallels between Rome and Las Vegas: their expansive settings in the Campagna and in the Mojave Desert, for instance, that tend to focus and clarify their images. On the other hand, Las Vegas was built in a day, or rather, the Strip was developed in a virgin desert in a short time. It was not superimposed on an older pattern as were the pilgrim's Rome of the Counter-Reformation and the commercial strips of eastern cities, and it is therefore easier to study. Each city is an archetype rather than a prototype, an exaggerated example from which to derive lessons for the typical. Each city vividly superimposes elements of a supranational scale on the local fabric: churches in the religious capital, casinos and their signs in the entertainment capital. These cause violent juxtapositions of use and scale in both cities. Rome's churches, off streets and piazzas, are open to the public; the pilgrim, religious or architectural, can walk from church to church. The gambler or architect in Las Vegas can similarly take in a variety of casinos along the Strip. The casinos and lobbies of Las Vegas are monumental and monumental and open to the promenading public; a few old banks and railroad stations excepted, they are unique in American cities. Noll's map of the mid-eighteenth century reveals the sensitive and complex connections between public and private space in Rome (Fig. 17). Private building is shown in gray crosshatching that is carved into by the public spaces, exterior and interior. These spaces, open or roofed, are shown in minute detail through darker poché. Interiors of churches read like piazzas and courtyards of palaces, yet a variety of qualities and scales is articulated.

§ MAPS OF LAS VEGAS

A "Noll" map of the Las Vegas Strip reveals and clarifies what is public and what is private, but here the scale is enlarged by the inclusion of the parking lot, and the solid-to-void ratio is reversed by the open spaces of the desert. Mapping the Noll components from an aerial photograph provides an intriguing crosscut of Strip systems (Fig. 18). These components, separated and redefined, could be undeveloped land, asphalt, auto, buildings, and ceremonial space (Figs. 19 a-e). Reassembled, they describe the Las Vegas equivalent of the pilgrim's way, although the description, like Noll's map, misses the iconological dimensions of the experience (Fig. 20).

A conventional land-use map of Las Vegas can show the overall structure of commercial use in the city as it relates to other uses but none of the detail of use type or intensity. "Land-use" maps of the insides of casino complexes, however, begin to suggest the systematic planning that all casinos share (Fig. 21). Strip "address" and "establishment" maps can depict both intensity and variety of use (Fig. 22). Distribution maps show patterns of, for example, churches, and food stores (Figs. 24, 25) that Las Vegas shares with other cities and those such as wedding chapels and auto rental stations (Figs. 26, 27) that are Strip-oriented and unique. It is extremely hard to suggest the atmospheric qualities of Las Vegas, because these are primarily dependent on watts (Fig. 23), animation, and iconology; however, "message maps," tourist maps, and brochures suggest some of it (Figs. 28, 71).

§ MAIN STREET AND THE STRIP

A street map of Las Vegas reveals two scales of movement within the gridiron plan: that of Main Street and that of the Strip (Figs. 29, 30). The main street of Las Vegas is Fremont Street, and the earlier of two concentrations of casinos is located along three of four blocks of this street (Fig. 31). The casinos here are bazaarlike in the immediacy to the sidewalk of their clicking and tinkling gambling machines (Fig. 32). The Fremont Street casinos and hotels focus on the railroad depot at the head of the street; here the railroad and main street scales of movement connect. The depot building is now gone, replaced by a hotel, and the bus station is now the busier entrance to town, but the axial focus on the railroad depot from Fremont Street was visual, and possibly syn
bolic. This contrasts with the Strip, where a second and later development of casinos extends southward to the airport, the jet-scale entrance to town (Figs. 23, 24, 42, 43, 52, 54).

One's first introduction to Las Vegas architecture is a forerunner of Eero Saarinen's TWA Terminal, which is the local airport building. Beyond this piece of architectural image, impressions are scaled to the car rented at the airport. Here is the unraveling of the famous Strip itself, which, as Route 91, connects the airport with the downtown (Fig. 33).

§ SYSTEM AND ORDER ON THE STRIP

The image of the commercial strip is chaos. The order in this landscape is not obvious (Fig. 34). The continuous highway itself and its systems for turning are absolutely consistent. The median strip accommodates the U-turns necessary to a vehicular promenade for casino crawlers as well as left turns onto the local street pattern that the Strip intersects. The curbing allows frequent right turns for casinos and other commercial enterprises and eases the difficult transitions from highway to parking. The streetlights function superfluously along many parts of the Strip that are incidentally but abundantly lit by signs, but their consistency of form and position and their arching shapes begin to identify by day a continuous space of the highway, and the constant rhythm contrasts effectively with the uneven rhythms of the signs behind (Fig. 35).

This counterpoint reinforces the contrast between two types of order on the Strip: the obvious visual order of street elements and the difficult visual order of buildings and signs. The zone of the highway is a shared order. The zone off the highway is an individual order (Fig. 36). The elements of the highway are civic. The buildings and 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 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.

There is an order along the sides of the highway. Varieties of activities are juxtaposed on the Strip: service stations, minor motels, and multi-million-dollar casinos. Marriage chapels ("credit cards accepted") converted from bungalows with added neon-lined steeples are apt to appear anywhere toward the downtown end. Immediate proximity of related uses, as on Main Street, where you walk from one store to another, is
8. Aerial photograph of upper Strip
21. Map of Las Vegas Strip (detail) showing uses within buildings
27. Maps showing comparative activity patterns: distribution of churches, food stores, wedding chapels, auto rentals.
31. Fremont Street

32. Fremont Street casino entrance

33. A detail from an “Edward Ruscha” elevation of the Strip. Tourist maps are made of the Grand Canal and the Rhine showing the route lined by its palaces. Ruscha made one of the Sunset Strip. We imitated his for the Las Vegas Strip.
not required along the Strip because interaction is by car and highway. You drive from one casino to another even when they are adjacent because of the distance between them, and an intervening service station is not disagreeable.

CHANGE AND PERMANENCE ON THE STRIP

The rate of obsolescence of a sign seems to be nearer to that of an automobile than that of a building. The reason is not physical degeneration but what competitors are doing around you. The leasing system operated by the sign companies and the possibility of total tax write-off may have something to do with it. The most unique, most monumental parts of the Strip, the signs and casino facades, are also the most changeable; it is the neutral, systems-motel structures behind that survive a succession of facelifts and a series of themes up front. The Aladdin Hotel and Casino is Moorish in front and Tudor behind (Fig. 13).

Las Vegas’s greatest growth has been since World War II (Figs. 37-40). There are noticeable changes every year: new hotels and signs as well as neon-embossed parking structures replacing on-lot parking on and behind Fremont Street. Like the agglomeration of chapels in a Roman church and the stylistic sequence of piers in a Gothic cathedral, the Golden Nugget casino has evolved over 30 years from a building with a sign on it to a totally sign-covered building (Fig. 41). The Stardust Hotel has engulfed a small restaurant and a second hotel in its expansion and has united the three-piece facade with 600 feet of computer-programmed animated neon.

§ THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE STRIP

It is hard to think of each flamboyant casino as anything but unique, and this is as it should be, because good advertising technique requires the differentiation of the product. However, these casinos have much in common because they are under the same sun, on the same Strip, and perform similar functions; they differ from other casinos—say, on Fremont Street—and from other hotels that are not casinos (Figs. 42, 43).

A typical hotel-casino complex contains a building that is near enough to the highway to be seen from the road across the parked cars, yet far enough back to accommodate driveways, turnarounds, and parking. The parking in front is a token: It reassures the customer but does not obscure the building. It is prestige parking: The customer pays. The bulk of the parking, along the sides of the complex, allows direct access to the hotel yet stays visible from the highway. Parking is seldom at the back. The scales of movement and space of the highway relate to the distances between buildings; because they are far apart, they can be comprehended at high speeds. Front footage on the Strip has not yet reached the value it once had on Main Street, and parking is still an appropriate filler. Big space between buildings is characteristic of the Strip. It is significant that Fremont Street is more photogenic than the Strip. A single postcard can carry a view of the Golden Horseshoe, the Mint Hotel, the Golden Nugget, and the Lucky Casino. A single shot of the Strip is less spectacular; its enormous spaces must be seen as moving sequences (Figs. 44, 45).

The side elevation of the complex is important, because it is seen by approaching traffic from a greater distance and for a longer time than the facade. The rhythmic gables on the long, low, English medieval style, half-timbered motel sides of the Aladdin read emphatically across the parking space (Fig. 46) and through the signs and the giant statue of the neighboring Texaco station, and contrast with the modern Near Eastern flavor of the casino front. Casino fronts on the Strip often inflect in shape and ornament toward the right, to welcome right-lane traffic. Modern styles use a porte cochere that is diagonal in plan. Brazilianoid International styles use free forms.

Service stations, motels, and other simpler types of buildings conform in general to this system of inflection toward the highway through the position and form of their elements. Regardless of the front, the back of the building is styleless, because the whole is turned toward the front and no one sees the back. The gasoline stations parade their universality (Fig. 47). The aim is to demonstrate their similarity to the one at home—your friendly gasoline station. But here they are not the brightest thing in town. This galvanizes them. A motel is a motel anywhere (Fig. 48). But here the imagery is heated up by the need to compete in the surroundings. The artistic influence has spread, and Las Vegas motels have signs like no others. Their arbor lies somewhere between the casinos and the wedding chapels. Wedding chapels, like many urban land uses, are not form-specific (Fig. 49). They tend to be one of a succession of uses: a more generalized building type (a bungalow or a store front) may have. But a wedding-chapel style or image is maintained in different types through the use of symbolic ornament in neon, and the activity adapts itself to different inherited plans. Street furniture exists on the Strip as on other city streets, yet it is hardly in evidence.

Beyond the town, the only transition between the Strip and the Mojave Desert is a zone of rusting beer cans (Fig. 50). Within the town, the transition is as ruthlessly sudden. Casinos whose fronts relate so sensitively to the highway turn their ill-kempt backside toward the local environment, exposing the residual forms and spaces of mechanical equipment and service areas.
Streetlights, upper Strip
Layerings of Facades & Plans

- Stadion Hotel, facade (by Koolhaas)
- Gothic Cathedrals (by Scarpa)
- Las Vegas Signs
- San Gimignano Towers
- Convention Center & Internatinal Hotel
- The Shopping Center
- The Golden Nugget

*The Evolution of Parking on "Main Street"

Stage 1: Parking on "Main" street.
Stage 2: Parking in hotel.
Stage 3: Parking in hotel (underground) with underground parking.

Change and Permanence

41. Physical change in Las Vegas
47. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip gas stations

48. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip motels

49. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip wedding chapels
THE INTERIOR OASIS

If the back of the casino is different from the front for the sake of visual impact in the "autoscope," the inside contrasts with the outside for other reasons. The interior sequence from the front door back progresses from gambling areas to dining, entertainment, and shopping areas, to hotel. Those who park at the side and enter there can interrupt the sequence. But the circulation of the whole focuses on the gambling room. In a Las Vegas hotel the registration desk is invariably behind you when you enter the lobby; before you are the gambling tables and machines. The lobby is the gambling room. The interior space and the patio, in their exaggerated separation from the environment, have the quality of an oasis.

§ LAS VEGAS LIGHTING

The gambling room is always very dark; the patio, always very bright. But both are enclosed: The former has no windows, and the latter is open only to the sky. The combination of darkness and enclosure of the gambling room and its subspaces makes for privacy, protection, concentration, and control. The intricate maze under the low ceiling never connects with outside light or outside space. This disorients the occupant in space and time. One loses track of where one is and when it is. Time is limitless, because the light of noon and midnight are exactly the same. Space is limitless, because the artificial light obscures rather than defines its boundaries (Fig. 51). Light is not used to define space. Walls and ceilings do not serve as reflective surfaces for light but are made absorbent and dark. Space is enclosed but limitless, because its edges are dark. Light sources, chandeliers, and the glowing jukebox like gambling machines themselves are independent of walls and ceilings. The lighting is antiarchitectural. Illuminated baldacchini, more than in all Rome, hover over tables in the limitless shadowy restaurant at the Sahara Hotel.

The artificially lit, air-conditioned interiors complement the glare and heat of the agoraphobic auto-scaled desert. But the interior of the motel patio behind the casino is literally the oasis in a hostile environment (Fig. 52). Whether Organic Modern or Neoclassical Baroque, it contains the fundamental elements of the classic oasis: courts, water, greenery, intimate scale, and enclosed space. Here they are a swimming pool, palms, grass, and other horticultural importations set in a paved court surrounded by hotel suites, balconied or terraced on one side for privacy. What gives poignance to the beach umbrellas and chaises longues is the vivid, recent memory of the hostile cars poised in the asphalt desert beyond. The pedestrian oasis in the Las Vegas desert
is the princely enclosure of the Alhambra, and it is the apotheosis of all the motel courts with swimming pools more symbolic than useful, the plain, low restaurants with exotic interiors, and the pretty shopping malls of the American strip.

§ ARCHITECTURAL MONUMENTALITY AND THE BIG, LOW SPACE

The casino in Las Vegas is big, low space. It is the archetype for all public interior spaces whose heights are diminished for reasons of budget and air conditioning. (The low, one-way-mirrored ceilings also permit outside observation of the gambling rooms.) In the past, volume was governed by structural span; height was relatively easy to achieve. Today, span is easy to achieve, and volume is governed by mechanical and economic limitations on height. But railroad stations, restaurants, and shopping arcades only ten feet high reflect as well a changing attitude to monumentality in our environment. In the past, big spans with their concomitant heights were an ingredient of architectural monumentality (Fig. 53). But our monuments are not the occasional tour de force of an Astrodome, a Lincoln Center, or a subsidized airport. These merely prove that big, high spaces do not automatically make architectural monumentality. We have replaced the monumental space of Pennsylvania Station by a subway above ground, and that of Grand Central Terminal remains mainly through its magnificent conversion to an advertising vehicle. Thus, we rarely achieve architectural monumentality when we try; our money and skill do not go into the traditional monumentality that expressed cohesion of the community through big-scale, unified, symbolic, architectural elements. Perhaps we should admit that our cathedrals are the chapels without the nave and that, apart from theaters and ball parks, the occasional communal space that is big is a space for crowds of anonymous individuals without explicit connection with each other. The big, low mazes of the dark restaurant with alcoves combine being together and yet separate as does the Las Vegas casino. The lighting in the casino achieves a new monumentality for the low space. The controlled sources of artificial and colored light within the dark enclosures expand and unify the space by obscuring its physical limits. You are no longer in the bounded piazza but in the twinkling lights of the city at night.

§ LAS VEGAS STYLES

The Las Vegas casino is a combination form. The complex program of Caesars Palace—one of the grandest—includes gambling, dining and banqueting rooms, nightclubs and auditoria, stores, and a complete hotel. It is also a combination of styles. The front colonnade is San Pietro-Bernini in plan but Yamashiki in vocabulary and scale (Figs. 54, 55); the blue and gold mosaic work is Early Christian tomb of Cata Placidia. (The Baroque symmetry of its prototype precludes an inclination toward the right in this facade.) Beyond and above is a slab in Gio Ponti Pirelli-Baroque, and beyond that, in turn, a low wing in Neo-classical Motel Moderne. Economics has vanquished symmetry in a recent addition. But the new slab and the various styles are integrated by a ubiquity of Ed Stone screens. The landscaping is also eclectic. Within the Piazza San Pietro is the token parking lot. Among the parked cars rise five fountains rather than the two of Carlo Maderno; Villa d’Este cypresses further punctuate the parking environment. Gian de Bologna’s Rape of the Sabine Women and statues of Venus and David, with slight anatomical exaggerations, grace the area around the porte cochere. Almost bisecting a Venus is a statue of a man in a suit and tie, wearing glasses, holding a briefcase.

The agglomeration of Caesars Palace and of the Strip as a whole approaches the spirit if not the style of the late Roman Forum with its eclectic accumulations. But the sign of Caesars Palace with its Classical, plastic columns is more Etruscan in feeling than Roman (Figs. 59, 60). Although not so high as the Dunes Hotel sign next door or the Shell sign on the other side, its base is enriched by Roman centurions, (Fig. 61) lacquered like Oldenburg hamburgers, who peer over the arcs of cars and across their desert empire to the mountains beyond. Their statuette esquires, carrying trays of fruit, suggest the festivities within and are a background for the family snapshots of Middle Westerners. Miesian light boxes announce square, expensive entertainers such as Jack Benny in 1930s-style marquee lettering appropriate for Benny if not for the Roman architrave it almost ornaments. The light boxes are not in the architrave; they are located off-center on the columns in order to inflect toward the highway and the parking.

§ LAS VEGAS SIGNS

Signs inflect toward the highway even more than buildings. The big sign—indeed, independent of the building and more or less sculptural or pictorial—inflects by its position, perpendicular to and at the edge of the highway, by its scale, and sometimes by its shape. The sign of the Aladdin Hotel and Casino seems to bow toward the highway through the inflection in its shape (Fig. 62). It also is three dimensional, and parts of it revolve. The sign at the Dunes Hotel is more chaste: It is only two dimensional, and its background is white, but it is an erection 22 stories high that pulsates at night (Fig. 63). The sign for the Mint Hotel on Route 91 at Fremont Street inflects toward the Casino several
blocks away. Signs in Las Vegas use mixed media words, pictures, and sculpture—to persuade and inform. A sign is, contradictorily, for day and night. The same sign works as polychrome sculpture in the sun and as black silhouette against the sun; at night it is a source of light. It revolves by day and becomes a play of lights at night (Figs. 64–67). It contains scales for close-up and for distance (Fig. 68). Las Vegas has the longest sign in the world, the Thunderbird, and the highest, the Dunes. Some signs are hardly distinguishable at a distance from the occasional high-rise hotels along the Strip. The sign of the Pioneer Club on Fremont Street talks. Its cowboy, 60 feet high, says "Howdy Partner" every 30 seconds. The big sign at the Aladdin Hotel has spawned a little sign with similar proportions to mark the entrance to the parking. "But such signs!" says Tom Wolfe. "They soar in shapes before which the existing vocabulary of art history is helpless. I can only attempt to supply names—Boomerang Modern, Palette Curvilinear, Flash Gordon Ming-Alert Spiral, McDonald's Hamburger Parabola, Mint Casino Elliptical, Miami Beach Kidney." Buildings are also signs. At night on Fremont Street, whole buildings are illuminated but not through reflection from spotlights; they are made into sources of light by closely spaced neon tubes. Amid the diversity, the familiar Shell and Gulf signs stand out like friendly beacons in a foreign land. But in Las Vegas they reach three times higher into the air than at your local service station to meet the competition of the casinos.

§ INCLUSION AND THE DIFFICULT ORDER

Henri Bergson called disorder an order we cannot see. The emerging order of the Strip is a complex order. It is not the easy, rigid order of the urban renewal project or the fashionable "total design" of the megastructure. It is, on the contrary, a manifestation of an opposite direction in architectural theory: Broadacre City—a travesty of Broadacre City, perhaps, but a kind of vindication of Frank Lloyd Wright's predictions for the American landscape. The commercial strip within the urban sprawl is, of course, Broadacre City with a difference. Broadacre City's easy, motley order identified and unified its vast spaces and separate buildings at the scale of the omnipotent automobile. Each building, without doubt, was to be designed by the Master or by his Taliesin Fellowship, with no room for honky-tonk improvisations. An easy control would be exercised over similar elements within the universal, Usonian vocabulary to the exclusion, certainly, of commercial vulgarities. But the order of the Strip includes; it includes at all levels, from the mixture of seemingly incongruous land uses to the mixture of seemingly incongruous advertising media plus a system of neo-Oriental or neo-Wrightian restaurant motifs in Walnut Formica (Fig. 69). 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, like the shifting configurations of a Victor Vasarely painting (Fig. 70). It is the unity that "maintains, but only just maintains, a control over the clashing elements which compose it. Chaos is very near; its nearness, but its avoidance, gives... force." 3

§ IMAGE OF LAS VEGAS: INCLUSION AND ALLUSION IN ARCHITECTURE

Tom Wolfe used Pop prose to suggest powerful images of Las Vegas. Hotel brochures and tourist handouts suggest others (Fig. 71). J. B. Jackson, Robert Riley, Edward Ruscha, John Kouwenhoven, Reynier Banham, and William Wilson have elaborated on related images. For the architect or urban designer, comparisons of Las Vegas with others of the world's "pleasure zones" (Fig. 72)—with Marienbad, the Alhambra, Xanadu, and Disneyland, for instance—suggest that essential to the imagery of pleasure-zone architecture are lightness, the quality of being an oasis in a perhaps hostile context, heightened symbolism, and the ability to engulf the visitor in a new role: for three days one may imagine oneself a centurion at Caesar's Palace, a ranger at the Frontier, or a jetsetter at the Riviera rather than a salesperson from Des Moines, Iowa, or an architect from Haddonfield, New Jersey.

However, there are didactic images more important than the images of recreation for us to take home to New Jersey and Iowa: one is the Avis with the Venus; another, Jack Benny under a classical pediment with Shell Oil beside him, or the gasoline station beside the multimillion-dollar casino. These show the vitality that may be achieved by an architecture of inclusion or, by contrast, the deadness that results from too great a preoccupation with tastefulness and total design. 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. Allusion and comment, on the past or present or on our great commonplaces or old clichés, and inclusion of the everyday in the environment, scenic and profane—these are what are lacking in present-day Modern architecture. We can learn about them from Las Vegas as have other artists from their own profane and stylistic sources.

VENUS DE MEDICI, by Giambologna, carved about 1530 B.C., is an extraordinary example of the Hellenistic art. The inspiration for this famous statue of the goddess, attempting to cover her nakedness, was the Venus of Milo, and was commissioned by the Medicis family. The Medici ruled the city of Florence during the days of the Renaissance, a period of artistic, literary, and architectural achievement, and they subsidized a number of renowned painters and sculptors. This Venus now stands in Galleria D'Arte, in Florence, Italy.

CAESARS PALACE takes pride in presenting these magnificently achieved Carrara marble statues, imported from Italy and representing some of the greatest art treasures of modern man.

In tribute to a Roman patron, Michelangelo once observed that the artist and sculptor created their art works to suit their own needs and fancies, but that those who glorified the works of others by displaying those treasures were the most noble of all men, since they were perpetuating a culture for all the world.

The brilliant contemporary sculptor, Sir Henry Moore, said: "Sculpture is an art of free space. It needs daylight, sunlight. Nature seems to be its best setting." In recognition of this, the CAESARS PALACE landscaping and architecture were designed to achieve the most effective and beautiful setting for these great works of art.

The statues on this page in CAESARS PALACE are carved in marble and were crafted especially for the Palace, the sculptors receiving an honorarium for their magnificent work.
Caesars Palace signs and statuary
Vegas signs and buildings
A message to the Strip Beautification Committee

Concerning Strip Beautification

A message to the Strip Beautification Committee

The image of the Champs Elysées

Trees block views & signs
Grass medians are hard to maintain
Lots of electricity and water raise humidity level of city

Everything strip hot & signs & architecture

Stations are all right,
Their station image plays against the unique architectural forms of the hotels
(in fact the gas stations are tasteful in comparison with the hotels)

We should be the New Eiffel:
Tiles, mosaics,
Maximum effect with a minimum amount of water
+ Electronic graphics
Modern, the strip should be paved in gold
Remember the floors of the parking lots

A message to the Strip Beautification Committee
PLEASURE ZONES
CHARACTERISTICS

LIGHT ARCHITECTURE

IN A HOSTILE CONTEXT, THE OASIS

SYMBOLIC ARCHITECTURE AND GARDENS

ROLE PLAYING
Pop artists have shown the value of the old cliche used in a new context to achieve a new meaning—the soup can in the art gallery—to make the common uncommon. And in literature, Eliot and Joyce display, according to Poirier, "an extraordinary vulnerability... to the idioms, rhythms, artifacts, associated with certain urban environments or situations. The multitudinous styles of Ulysses are so dominated by them that there are only intermittent sounds of Joyce in the novel and no extended passage certifiably in his as distinguished from a mimicked style." Poirier refers to this as the "decriptive impulse." Eliot himself speaks of Joyce's doing the best he can "with the material at hand." Perhaps a fitting requiem for the irrelevant works of Art that are today's descendants of a once meaningful Modern architecture are Eliot's lines in "East Coker".

That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

§ A SIGNIFICANCE FOR
A&P PARKING LOTS, OR
LEARNING FROM LAS
VEGAS: A STUDIO
RESEARCH PROBLEM

School of Art and Architecture,
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The studio programs and work topics were designed by Denise Scott Brown. Portions of them are quoted in these notes. Excerpts from writings by students have their names appended.

§ SYMBOL IN SPACE BEFORE FORM IN SPACE: LAS VEGAS AS A COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

WELCOME TO FABULOUS LAS VEGAS, FREE ASPIRIN—ASK US ANYTHING, VACANCY, GAS.

All cities communicate messages—functional, symbolic, persuasive—to people as they move about. Las Vegas signs hit you at the California border and before you land at the airport. On the Strip three message systems exist: the heraldic—the signs—dominates (Fig. 1); the physiognomic, the messages given by the faces of the buildings—the continuous balconies and regularly spaced picture windows of the Dunes saying HOTEL (Fig. 3) and the suburban bungalows converted to chapels by the addition of a steeple (Fig. 4); and the locational—service stations are found on comer 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 interrelated on the Strip. Sometimes they are combined, as when the facade of a casino becomes one big sign (Fig. 5) or the shape of the building reflects its name, and the sign, in turn, reflects the shape. How does the building or the building the sign?
These relationships, and combinations between signs and buildings, between architecture and symbolism, between form and meaning, between driver and the roadside are deeply relevant to architecture today and have been discussed at length by several writers. But they have not been studied in detail or as an overall system. The students of urban perception and “imageability” have ignored them, and there is some evidence that the Strip would confound their theories. How is it that in spite of “noise” from competing signs we do in fact find what we want on the Strip? Also, we have no good graphic tools for depicting the Strip as message giver. How can the visual importance of the Stardust sign be mapped at 1 inch to 100 feet?

§ THE ARCHITECTURE OF PERSUASION

In *The View From the Road*, Appleyard, Lynch, and Myer describe the driving experience as “a sequence played to the eyes of a captive, somewhat fearful, but partially inattentive audience, whose vision is filtered and directed forward.”

Movement perception along a road is within a structural order of constant elements—the road, sky, lamppost spacing, and yellow stripes. A person can orient to this, while the rest just happens! Lynch found that more than half the objects sighted along a road by both drivers and passengers are seen straight ahead and narrowly to the sides, as if with blinders (Fig. 11). (That is why the sign must be big and must be along the road.) About one-third of the attention is off to the immediate sides. Attention is also more focused on “moving” objects than on “stable” ones, except when the observer passes a visual barrier and, in order to reorient, surveys a new landscape. Speed is the determinant of focal angle, both for driver and passengers. Increases of speed narrow the focal angle with a resulting visual shift from detail to generality; attention shifts to points of decision. The body sensations of speed are few in a car. We depend upon vision for our perception of speed. Objects that pass overhead greatly increase the sense of speed.

Does Las Vegas make any attempt to control speed—slow down, therefore see more detail, therefore buy? (Daniel Scully and Peter Schmitt)

§ VAST SPACE IN THE HISTORICAL TRADITION AND AT THE A&P

The Las Vegas Strip eludes our concepts of urban form and space, ancient or modern. It has as little to do with Haussmann as with Ville Radienue, with Eben- orzber Howard as with the Metabolicists, with Lynch as with Camillo Sitte or Ian Nairn. Frank Lloyd Wright would have considered it a travesty of Broadacre City, and Maki would probably find it a travesty of “group form.” Perhaps Patrick Geddes might have understood and J. B. Jackson is very much attuned to it.

Although its buildings suggest a number of historical styles, its urban spaces owe nothing to historical space. Las Vegas space is neither contained and enclosed like medieval space nor classically balanced and proportioned like Renaissance space nor swept up in a rhythmically ordered movement like Baroque space, nor does it flow like Modern space around freestanding urban space makers. It is something else again. But what? Not chaos, but a new spatial order relating the automobile and highway communication in an architecture which abandons pure form in favor of mixed media. Las Vegas space is so different from the docile spaces for which our analytical and conceptual tools were evolved that we need new concepts and theories to handle it.

One way of understanding the new form and space is to compare it with the old and the different. Compare Las Vegas with Ville Radienue and Haussmann’s Paris; compare the Strip with a medieval market street (Figs. 8, 12); compare Fremont Street, a shopping center, and the pilgrims’ way through Rome. Compare a form that “just grew” with its designed equivalent and with “group forms” from other cultures.

Another way of understanding the new form is to describe carefully and then analyze what is there and, from an understanding of the city as it is, to evolve new theories and concepts of form more suited to twentieth-century realities and therefore more useful as conceptual tools in design and planning. This approach provides a way out of the CIAM grid. But how does one describe new form and space using techniques derived from the old? What techniques can represent the 60mph form and space of the Strip? How does its desert site affect Las Vegas form and space? Do Las Vegas public and institutional buildings show any influences from its recreational architecture?

§ MAPS OF LAS VEGAS (Figs. 18-27, 71)

The representation techniques learned from architecture and planning impede our understanding of Las Vegas. They are static where it is dynamic, contains where it is open, two-dimensional where it is three-dimensional. How do you show the Aladdin sign meaningfully in plan, section, and elevation, or show the Golden Slipper on a land-use plan? Architectural techniques
are suitable for large, broad objects in space, like buildings, but not for thin, intense objects, like signs; planning techniques are able to depict activity (land use), but in excessively general categories, for the ground floor only, and without intensity.

We need techniques for abstracting, for example, to represent “twin phenomena” or to demonstrate concepts and generalized schema—an archetypal casino or a piece of the urban fabric—rather than specific buildings. The pretty photographs that we and other tourists made in Las Vegas are not enough.

How do you distort these to draw out a meaning for a designer? How do you differentiate on a plan between form that is to be specifically built as shown and that which is, within constraints, allowed to happen? How do you represent the Strip as perceived by Mr. A. rather than as a piece of geometry? How do you show quality of light—or qualities of form—in plan at 1 inch to 100 feet? How do you show fluxes and flows, or seasonal variation, or change with time?

LAS VEGAS AS A PATTERN OF ACTIVITIES

A city is a set of intertwined activities that form a pattern on the land. The Las Vegas Strip is not a chaotic sprawl but a set of activities whose pattern, as with other cities, depends on the technology of movement and communication and the economic value of land. We term it sprawl, because it is a new pattern we have not yet understood. The aim here is for us as designers to derive an understanding of this new pattern.

The questions are: How can the traditional city planning methods for depicting activity patterns (land-use and transportation maps) be adapted to a city such as Las Vegas? How can they be made useful as inspiration sources and design tools for urban designers? What other methods are there for coming to an understanding of the city as an activity system?

In search of answers, we shall experiment with different techniques for representing the following:

1. Las Vegas and the Strip as phenomena in the space economy, national and local.
2. Land use and intensity of use for the region in general and the Strip in detail.
3. The linkages between activities on and around the Strip.
4. Movement and stopping systems for auto, transit, pedestrian, rail, and air for the region and for pedestrian, transit, and auto for the Strip.
5. Volume and flow of different types of traffic at different time periods.
6. The relation between activities and movement at different scales along the Strip.
7. The Strip as recreation system, a promenade.

These studies will give us a broad understanding of why things are where they are in Las Vegas.

§ MAIN STREET AND THE STRIP

On Fremont Street the casinos are part of the sidewalk (Figs. 31-33). On the Strip the public space goes right through the casinos and into the patios beyond, where the relation between public open space and private suites is mediated by a set of sensitive devices. Even the parking lots, which in other cities have about the same public significance as the bathroom corridor (that is, they are public, but you would rather not notice them), are here ritualized and given a ceremonial function. The relation between public space, public-private space, and private space is as intricate and intriguing as that of the Rome of the Counter-Reformation (Figs. 23, 24, 42, 43, 52, 54).

§ SYSTEM AND ORDER ON THE STRIP: “TWIN PHENOMENA”

Aldo van Eyck has defined what others might call polar opposites—inside and outside, public and private, unique and general—as “twin phenomena,” because these pairs are inextricably intertwined at every level in the city.

Differences between the blazing outside and the cool, dark inside are poignantly strong in Las Vegas; yet they are counter crossed by the domesticated “outside” inside the patio and by the night-sky lighting of the casino lounges. Day is negated inside the casinos, and night is negated on the Strip. The signs are, contradictorily, for day and night.

The casinos flaunt their uniqueness yet are backed by generalized systematized motel space behind. They are set off by the gasoline stations that use their standard, national designs but make their signs uniquely high. The street lighting and road signs are rigidly systematic in contrast with the signs of persuasion that shout their gorgeous cacophony but hide their constraining order (Figs. 35, 36). Some Strip establishments, such as casinos and wedding chapels, are generators, and others, such as motels and gasoline stations, benefit from the market generated.

§ THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE STRIP: COMPILED A PATTERN BOOK (Figs. 42-49)

To find the system behind the flamboyance, we devised schedules of individual building parts—floors, walls, gas pumps, parking lots, plans, elevation (front, back, and side)—for different building types and for portions of the street. These parts can then be reassembled as a two-dimensional graph for each build-
ing type with buildings on the X axis and parts of buildings on the Y axis. Reading across we have one building; reading down one column, all elevations of that building type on the Strip; and on the diagonal, a prototypical building (Figs. 42, 43).

GASOLINE STATIONS (FIG. 47)

The client: The real estate department of the oil company. Handles site acquisition, construction and coordination, financing, and so forth.

The site: Determined by the traffic count, cost of land, and competition. Frontage generally determines cost—average 150 feet.

The building: Two or three service bays, facing the front; the office; storage space; customer services—"travel center," vending machines, rest rooms, and so forth.

The styling: Pressures from the beautification people and local zoning boards; Mobil’s "modern" box, Shell’s "ranch house," and the universal "Colonial" (it's just like your suburban house, except it has pumps in front); use of residential materials—wood, brick, stone; a trend toward standardized form where the building becomes a sign.

The signs: Three orders of magnitude: one sign for great distances (freeway scale); one sign for approach distances (feeder road); the building or sign canopy for close-up.

The lighting: Says station is open; lighting crucial at entrance, exit, and pumps. Oil companies want the source of light visible for maximum impact, resist indirect lighting; big problems with bugs and with zoning boards.

The service area: Pumps and oil displays; canopy provides protection from the sun and bad weather and acts as a sign (Mobil's circle or Phillips' soaring V). Must be fully visible from the service bays in the station, because most stations are one- or two-man operations. There must be plenty of room to maneuver in order to prevent collisions with the pumps and equipment.

"For the average citizen there are some simple tests which will tell him when we have passed from incantation to practical action on the environment. Restriction of auto use in the large cities will be one. Another will be when the billboards, the worst and most nearly useless excrecence of industrial civilization, are removed from the highways.... My own personal test, for what it may be worth, concerns the gasoline service station. This is the most repellent piece of architecture of the past two thousand years. There are far more of them than are needed. Usually they are filthy. Their merchandise is hideously packaged and garishly displayed. They are uncontrollably addicted to great strings of ragged little flags. Protecting them is an ominous coalition of small businessmen and large. The stations should be excluded entirely from most streets and highways. Where allowed, they should be franchised to limit the number, and there should be stern requirements as to architecture, appearance, and general reticence. When we begin on this (and similar roadside commerce), I will think that we are serious."

John Kenneth Galbraith

MOTELS (FIG. 48)

The site: Determined by traffic count, access to freeways, frontage costs, easy visibility; office and restaurant nearest road; meeting rooms to draw the businessman; bedrooms away from road, adjacent to parking and grouped about a pool, patio, and so forth.

The buildings: Office and canopy with temporary parking; restaurant with parking; convention facilities; bedrooms near parking and connected by covered walkways to other facilities; the standard room size is 14 feet wide by 27, 24, or 21 feet long. Enter off a double-loaded corridor, luggage rack, closet and shelf space on one side; dressing room with sink and bathroom on other; then bed-sitting room; large sliding glass window to patio, balcony, pool; TV opposite the bed; luggage rack, desk, and TV counter in one continuation.

§ LAS VEGAS LIGHTING

Las Vegas daylight, like Greek daylight, makes the polychrome temples stand out proud and clear in the desert. This is a quality hard to catch on film. No photographs of the Acropolis do it justice. And Las Vegas is better known for its night light than its daylight.

§ ARCHITECTURAL MONUMENTALITY AND THE BIG LOW SPACE: THE FONTAINEBLEAU

"To get into the dining room you walk up three steps, open a pair of doors and walk out on a platform, and then walk down three steps. Now the dining room is at exactly the same level as my lobby, but as they walk up they reach the platform. I’ve got soft light lighting this thing up, and before they’re seated, they are on stage as if they had been cast for the part. Everybody’s look..."
ing at them; they’re looking at everybody else.”
—Morris Lapidus

§ LAS VEGAS STYLES

Miami Moroccan, International Jet Set Style; Arte Moderne Hollywood Orgasmic, Organic Behind; Yamasaki Bernini cum Roman Orgiastic; Niemeyer Moorish; Moorish Tudor (Arabian Knights); Bauhaus Hawaiian.

“People are looking for illusions; they don’t want the world’s realities. And, I asked, where do I find this world of illusion? Where are their tastes formulated? Do they study it in school? Do they go to museums? Do they travel in Europe? Only one place—the movies. They go to the movies. The hell with everything else.”
—Morris Lapidus

§ LAS VEGAS SIGNS (FIGS. 62-68)

The time has arrived for a scholar to write a doctoral dissertation on signs. He or she would need literary as well as artistic acumen, because the same reason that makes signs Pop Art (the need for high-speed communication with maximum meaning) makes them Pop literature as well. For example, this one from Philadelphia:

O. R. JUMPIN’ BODYBUILDERS.
FENDERS STRAIGHTENED.
WRECKS OUR SPECIALITY. WE
TAKE THE DENT OUT OF ACCI-
DENT.

We shall be analyzing and categorizing the signs of Las Vegas by content and form, by function (night and day) and location, as well as by size, color, structure, and method of construction, trying to understand what makes the “Las Vegas style” in signs and what we can learn from them about an impure architecture of form and symbols.

A stylistic analysis of Las Vegas signs would trace the influence of the greats (the designers in YESCO) through to the minor architecture of wedding chapels and sauna baths, compare the national and general sign imagery of the gasoline stations with the unique and specific symbolic imagery of the casinos, and follow the influence patterns back and forth between artists and sign makers. It would trace parallels with historical architecture that emphasizes association and symbolism, such as Romanticism, eclecticism, Man-
erism, and the iconographic aspects of Gothic architecture, and tie these into the sign styles of Las Vegas.

In the seventeenth century, Rubens created a painting “factory” wherein different workers specialized in drapery, foliage, or nudes. In Las Vegas there is just such a sign “factory,” the Young Electric Sign Company. Someone should talk to and observe and document each of the departments in YESCO; find out the backgrounds of the designers; watch the whole design process.

Is there a private vocabulary for sign designers such as that existing in architecture? How is the contradiction between form and function resolved in sign design? Carefully photograph the sign models.

How do people actually use Route 91, the median strip, the entrance ways to casinos, the parking lots, and the pedestrian access? How do they react to signs?

REPORT ON A SURVEY OF DRIVERS ENTERING HOTEL DRIVEWAYS

1. Most drivers took the first entrance available to them after becoming aware of the limits of the property of the place they desired to go to.

2. Most people disregarded the sign and planned internal workings of the parking lot as determined by the designer. Note the Circus Circus Casino sign.

3. The location of the signs and the other parking lot furniture seemed to have little influence on the use of the lot.

4. The apparent property line is a controlling element in the way people see the parking lot.

5. Visual elements, such as the fountains at Caesar’s Palace and Circus Circus, control the drivers more powerfully than any of the other directional signs. (John Kranz and Tony Zinino)

§ INCLUSION AND THE DIFFICULT ORDER

“Modern systems! Yes, indeed!”

To approach everything in a strictly methodical manner and not to wave a hair’s breadth from preconceived patterns until genius has been strangled to death and joie de vivre stifled by the system—that is the sign of our time.”
—Camillo Sitte

“It is fruitless, however, to search for some dramatic key element or king pin which, if made clear, will clarify all. No single element in a city is, in truth, the king pin. The mixture is the king pin, and its mutual support is the order.”
—Jane Jacobs

“The key word is: Proportion. No matter what you may call it—beauty, eye appeal, good taste, or architectural compatibility, limiting the size of electrical advertising displays does not ensure any of these. Proportions—the relationship of graphic ele-


4. Ibid., p. 120.


ments to each other are necessary to good design, whether it be a matter of clothing, art, architecture, or an electrical sign. Relative size, not over-all size, is the factor in determining guidelines which will satisfactorily influence attractive appearance."

—California Electric Sign Association

Should a gas station on the Strip be required to blend with (that is, look like) the casinos?

How can a design intention be differentiated graphically from one possible design among many that might stem from a design control?

Computer-video urban simulation systems suggest possibilities for controls to be tried out through the simulation of environments. Imaginatively used, this could make for looser yet more efficient controls.

CONTROLS AND BEAUTIFICATION

The Las Vegas Strip "just grew," and perhaps its initiators built it outside the city limits in order to escape controls. But today there are the usual building and zoning controls and a "Strip Beautification Committee" as well (Fig. 69). There is no good record of commissions on aesthetics producing good architecture.7 (Haussmann was not a

commission but a one-man control system. His power and its results are dubiously desirable and certainly unattainable today.) Commissions produce mediocrity and a deadened urb. What will happen to the Strip when the tastemakers take over?

SIGN CONTROL

The basic premises of three major parties are as follows:

Aesthetician: "Urban environment as medium of communication. ... Signs should enhance and clarify this communication."

Sign Industry: "Signs are good, they're good for business, that makes 'um good for H'america too."

Legal Statutes: "If you'll just perform these minimal requirements we can collect a fee for the city and you gentlemen can continue your sender-message-receiver responses."

(Charles Korn)

§ IMAGE OF LAS VEGAS: INCLUSION AND ALLUSION IN ARCHITECTURE (FIGS. 71, 72)

An image employed by a designer should be something very evocative, something that does not limit by being too defined and too concrete, yet helps the designer think of the city in physical terms. Laughing or crying faces or people sitting at gambling machines are not enough. What is an urban designer's image, or set of images, for the Strip and the big low-slung spaces of the casinos? What techniques movie, graphic, or other should be used to depict them?

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries an integral part of an architect's education consisted of sketching Roman ruins. If the eighteenth-century architect discovered his design gestalt by means of the Grand Tour and a sketch pad, we as twentieth-century architects will have to find our own "sketch pad" for Las Vegas.

We feel that we should construct our visual image of Las Vegas by means of a collage made from Las Vegas artifacts of many types and sizes, from YESCO signs to the Caesars Palace daily calendar. To construct this collage, you should collect images, verbal slogans, and objects. Bear in mind that, however diverse the pieces, they must be juxtaposed in a meaningful way, for example, as are Rome and Las Vegas in this study. Document the American piazza versus the Roman, and Noll's Rome versus the Strip.