

LAS VEGAS STUDIO Images from the Archives of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown











Images: View through RMIT Design Hub Project Rooms. Exhibition design: Searle x Waldron. Photography: Tobias Titz.

LAS VEGAS STUDIO » IMAGES FROM THE ARCHIVES OF ROBERT VENTURI & DENISE SCOTT BROWN

Published in 1972, Learning from Las Vegas was the defining text to pre-empt the post-modern era and a "rhetorical thunderbolt" for a generation of young architects searching for a release from the rigours of Modernism. Emerging from a 1968 architectural design studio led by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steve Izenour at Yale University's School of Architecture and Art, the publication broke down the idea that architectural theory was something that was only to be found on the shelves of a library. While Venturi's earlier book Complexity and Contradiction was a manifesto, Learning from Las Vegas tested the ideas raised against a real city. Their research focused on the commercial Las Vegas Strip as an exemplar representation of the aesthetics of urban sprawl in its purest and most extreme form, arguing through example that the importation of refined European ideals of Modernism may not be the most effective model for the development of a Modern America.

It is perhaps unsurprising that *Learning from Las Vegas* found the most resonance in Melbourne within an Australian context. Devoid of a sparkling harbour or stretches of pristine white sand, Melbourne was the 'ugly ducking' of Australian cities and, in response, invested in its built fabric to create a thriving city. While the suburbs may have endured Robin Boyd's fierce criticism of 'featurism' in *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), the reality was that when viewed within the frame of *Complexity and Contradiction* these suburbs were dynamic, thriving and full of life. In 1972, as the Whitlam government swept into power, there was a distinct energy for change. A rising group of Melbourne architects were suspicious of imported 'taste' from Europe and frustrated with their own lacklustre traditional architectural education from the sandstone universities. Increasingly, these architects were investigating the local context and searching for new measures to understand and respond to their city.

It was within this spirit that Peter Corrigan left for the USA to attend Yale, forging an ongoing dialogue with Venturi that would prove a lasting legacy on his work; Corbett Lyon travelled to Philadelphia for post-graduate studies with Steven Izenour and then worked for Venturi Scott Brown Associates in both Philadelphia and New York. In Adelaide, a young Ian McDougall and Richard Munday encountered a copy of Learning from Las Vegas that provided a radical shift in thinking that eventually brought them both to Melbourne to study. At RMIT, Leon van Schaik maintained a close relationship with Scott Brown that originated in South Africa as a child and corresponded regularly on the work of emerging Melbourne practices. While Howard Raggatt's earlier encounter with Complexity and Contradiction proved a lasting influence, provoking a dialogue with Venturi in relationship to Ashton Raggatt McDougall's Howard Kronbora Medical Clinic – a seminal project for the practice that experiments with referencing via a slipped image of the Vanna Venturi house stretched and scanned on a photocopier. The influence of Venturi and Scott Brown's texts and research studios inspired these architects to look at the city differently and allowed them to dream a different reality of Australia that wasn't beach and harbour but a diverse city filled with opportunity, life and a sense of honour and local culture to be found within our suburbs.

Here, at RMIT Design Hub, the exhibition Las Vegas Studio: Images from the Archives of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown presents the images and films that were produced during the Learning from Las Vegas research (first exhibited at the Museum im Bellpark, Kriens, Switzerland in 2008/2009). These archival materials are presented alongside a series of commissioned video interviews and a display of objects and ephemera collected from local architects and academics that trace the impact of Venturi and Scott Brown's influence on the development of Melbourne's architectural culture and ideology. For RMIT Design Hub, the critical aspect of the show is that it demonstrates clearly design research as an integral underpinning to architectural practice and that careful observation and application of knowledge are key drivers for the production and dissemination of ideas.

1. As described in the essay: "Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Bown and the Image of the City", Images from the Archives

of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. Edited by Hilar Stadler and Martino Stierli in collaboration with Peter Fischli,

Fleur Watson Curator

RMIT Design Hub

Museum of Bellpark, Kriens, Zurich, 2008.

THE VENTURIS AND I

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown make me proud of my trade, which is the imagining and building of places inhabited by human beings. Their work suggests to me a moral engagement, and I note here how the elitism of the profession has been questioned by Scott Brown's populist agenda. Some years ago, I read excerpts from Robert Venturi's, Complexity and Contradiction. The originality of the ideas "blew me away" and I wrote a gushing letter to the author awash with youthful enthusiasm. Some weeks later I received an inscribed copy of the book, which I treasured for the time I had it (it was later to be stolen by a fellow student from California). The cover struck me as particularly exciting. It was a drawing of a modern public building by Robert Venturi with a startling front elevation, which showed the American flag hanging horizontally (half mast) above the front entry. This simple gesture struck me as daring in its celebration of identity, but after my first week in New Haven, it quickly became apparent to me that this horizontal flag business was perfectly normal in the US of A.

For at least two decades a comparable confusion swirled around this text because the solemn grandeur of late modernism was being threatened by such life-affirming ideas as 'main street is almost right' and the 'decorated shed' is preferable to 'the building as a sign'. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown reaffirmed the progress of history and made an act of faith in the culture around them. The Venturis looked at the mundane real world of the USA and politely proposed that architecture might be more than the model and measure of beauty, it should engage with experience. The Venturi's suggested that a way forward might harmonise reason and imagination, that an empirical truth could offer a creative promise. Mine was a fraught relationship with them at Yale, their Las Vegas studio seemed too structured and too far from the mother ship - I considered Complexity and Contradiction as the more vital and important work. While still a student, I wrote a long article for Architecture Australia, which made some smart-aleck St Kilda judgements, which I regretted a bit too late. At least I wrote a grovelling apology when I saw the error of my ways and this was graciously accepted.

During a later time spent in Boston I found the atmosphere in the Graduate School of Design at Harvard a little more congenial upstairs in the Landscape Department (first established by Charles Olmstead in the nineteenth century). Here I met a charming Frank Gehry who showed me great generosity. On my return flight home I stopped off to attend a party at his home in Santa Monica, California. Swept up by the glamour of it all I purchased a copy of Learning from Las Vegas at the local bookshop and after sufficient drinks offered it to Harry Cobb (my patient Dean at Harvard), Peter Eisenman (a fellow and exuberant Harvard Staff member with whom I shared an office) and Robert Venturi (who by now was truly tired of me) but he patiently signed along with the others.

At the time I distinctly remember I considered asking Charles Jencks and then deciding not to bother with his signature as he was merely an ambitious English historian; a toadstool amongst these gorgeous flowers of architects. Frank Gehry's Panamanian wife was far more impressive. When I received the RAIA Gold Medal in 2004 I received, to my surprise, a lovely cryptic letter from the Venturis. I treasured it but, as they say, the dog ate it and it disappeared. Some months later I found myself writing yet another apologetic, weedling, shamefaced letter to the Venturis. In my mind's eye I could plainly see the patient, weary look on Robert's face and the pinching at the corners of Denise's mouth. But they were steady as ever and I promptly received a replacement copy.

The Venturis raised the possibility of a "speaking" architecture, an architecture of identity, alive to a vernacular, which could bring new life to the contemporary city. They proposed an architecture of symbols that could offer a deeper level of meaning beyond the spatial and the visual. Here the medium was not the message. In an article that ran under the title: "My architecture attempts to celebrate the Australian-ness of our lives", in the Australian edition of *Vogue Living* (October, 1984), Betsy Brennan interviewed me regarding my time in the USA.

"One of the reasons I went to Yale was because Robert Venturi was teaching there. I thought his ideas represented a sense of a national vision, rather than the universal truths that are constantly being sought in architecture. A more modest basis from which to work; we are Americans why don't we use the stuff we've got rather than looking to Europe or history books. That appealed to me – the possibility of an art coming out of a community. But, also, I could get Australia into sharper perspective from there. A lot of the things architects tend to despise began to interest me, not so much because of their intrinsic worth but because they had some cultural cogency. Cream bricks, timber windows, red tiles – not just these obvious bits of technology but the type of mentality behind them; particularly in suburbia. Liking or not liking it didn't seem to be the issue. These points of taste began to annoy me, as they did Venturi. When you can put things together that don't immediately appeal or fall within a cream-to-white colour scheme, there's potential energy to be had."

Most significantly, the Venturis made their own projects. Robert's light wit lies within the body of work, clearly exhibited in his remarkable house for his mother, Vanna Venturi. We can examine the work and, looking at it, we find out who they are. Melbourne architects should take note. With the Venturis examination of a new typology we start to confront the end of the old. Enlightenment model of a 'top down' architecture. We hear the roar of sand through the Post-modern hourglass.

Peter Corrigan

LAS VEGAS STUDIO » IMAGES FROM THE ARCHIVES OF ROBERT VENTURI & DENISE SCOTT BROWN

Learning from Las Vegas was both a serious urbanistic study and a rhetorical thunderbolt. The book presented its authors' unease with contemporary architectural discourse in a form that had both visual and verbal power. Since its publication in 1972, hardly any other text has succeeded in monopolizing architectural discourse to the same extent—with the possible exception of S, M, L, XL by Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau (1995). The study tapped the nerve of the age in seeking answers to problems that had been preoccupying architecture and urbanism for a considerable time. What was at debate was the form and aesthetics of the contemporary city. Architects and theoreticians regarded the increasing decentralization and suburbanization of the city with perplexity and disapproval. Such phenomena were seen not only as a crisis in the function, but also as the image of the city and were matters of controversy. A fundamental question in urbanistic discourse around 1960 was therefore, what was the image of the contemporary city? How could sprawling cities still be conceived as coherent units and how could they be displayed visually?

In their research on Las Vegas, which started in the mid-1960s and eventually led to the publication of their famous book, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown attempted to find answers to these questions. Their interest focused on the commercial Las Vegas Strip, as they regarded it as representing the aesthetics of urban sprawl in its purest and most extreme form. They approached the object of their study in an ambivalent way—from both an analytical and an aesthetic point of view. On the one hand, they were concerned with documenting the specific visual characteristics of this urban form comprehensively and accurately. On the other, the spectacular aesthetics of the Strip's (sign) architecture unmistakably held an immense fascination for them. In their research project, Venturi and Scott Brown relied primarily on the popular visual media of photography and film. Even before the book, a number of publications had taken advantage of these relatively new media in order to represent cities. Venturi and Scott Brown for the first time used them consistently to achieve a comprehensive stocktaking of a city in the context of a study in architectural theory. "New analytic techniques," Denise Scott Brown wrote in this context, "must use film and videotape to convey the dynamism of sign architecture and the sequential experience of vast landscapes."

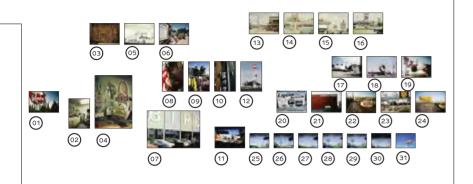
In terms of both content and methodology, Venturi and Scott Brown in Learning from Las Vegas connected to problems in contemporary architectural discourse in many ways. Beyond that, the book succeeded in establishing a firm place for itself in 20th-century architectural and urbanistic theory. There were important reasons for this. Venturi and Scott Brown were among the first to introduce aspects of the everyday, the ugly and ordinary into Modernist debates on architecture and urbanism. Las Vegas served as a symbol for this undertaking. The aim of Learning from Las Vegas was to study and to present the aesthetics of the Strip as the product of an authentic American popular culture—a popular culture that had found a valid form for the idea of a city "from below"; a city that had (supposedly) evolved spontaneously and without the assistance of an architect or any other planning authority.

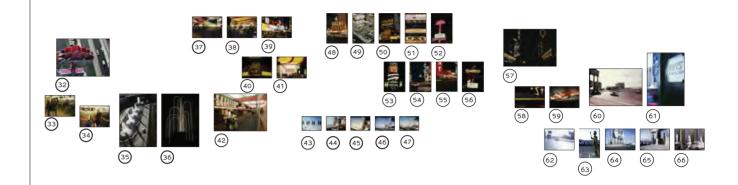
In their manifesto, Venturi and Scott Brown argued not only that architects ought to accept the aesthetics of America's commercial popular culture, but also that this aesthetic could serve as the starting-point for a contemporary architectural design. Their decisive argument was that the city had to be considered not how it should be, but the way it actually was. Venturi and Scott Brown primarily saw themselves as readers and interpreters of an existing cultural and urban state. In taking this position, they distanced themselves from modern architects' preferred role-model—that of a godlike demiurge who was committed not to the reality of the city, but instead to a social and architectural utopia that had yet to be achieved. Venturi and Scott Brown's approach was revolutionary precisely in its renunciation of the rhetoric of revolution in favor of focusing architectural thought and action on the here and now. They captured this visually in their photographic and filmic research on the Strip. Working with the image of the city, and working on the image of the city, became one of their central concerns. It is this insistence on the city as it is that is the lasting legacy of Learning from Las Vegas.

Martino Stierli Author and curator









- La Concha Motel Las Vegas, 1968
- Robert Venturi with mock-ups of casino signs, Young Electric Sign Company offices Las Vegas, 1968
- Sketches of signs, 1968
- Mock- ups of casino signs Young Electric Sign Company offices, Las Vegas, 1968
- Robert Venturi with mockup of the Frontier Hotel and Casino Las Vegas, 1968
- Neon sign graveyard, Las Vegas, 1968
- Thunderbird Hotel and Casino, entrance Las Vegas, 1968
- Neon sign graveyard Las Vegas, 1968
- Robert Venturi at the neon sign graveyard Las Vegas, 1968
- (10) Parking lot on the Strip Las Vegas, ca. 1968
- Preparations for the film Las Vegas Deadpan Las Vegas, 1968
- "Gulf" gas station, Las Vegas, 1971
- American suburbia ca. 1968
 - The Big Duck shop in the shape of a duck on the highway on Long Island, Flanders, New York, ca. 1970
 - (18) Big Donut Drive-in Los Angeles, ca. 1970
 - (19) Tail Pup takeaway restaurant Los Angeles, ca. 1970
 - Liquor Drive-in Los Angeles, 1968
 - Gaslite Motel Las Vegas, 1968
 - Advertisement signs on the highway Las Vegas, 1968
 - Billboard Las Vegas, 1968

- "Tanya" Billboard on the Strip, Las Vegas, 1968
- (25) (31) Sequence, upper Strip, driving north Las Vegas, 1968
 - Flamingo Hotel and Casino sign Las Vegas, 1968
- (33)—(34) Students of the "Learning from Las Vegas Research Studio" filming on Fremont Street Las Vegas, 1968
 - Caesars Palace Hotel and Casino fountain Las Vegas, 1968
 - Neon Fountain Las Vegas, 1968
 - Fremont Street Las Vegas, 1968
 - Fremont Street Las Vegas, 1968
 - 37 38 39 Fremont Street neon signs Las Vegas, 1968
 - Golden Nugget Las Vegas, ca. 1968
 - Fremont Street Las Vegas, 1968
 - Fremont Street Las Vegas, 1968
- (43)—(47)Sequence, lower trip, driving north Las Vegas, 1968
 - Riviera Hotel and Casino sign Las Vegas, 1968
 - Four Queens Casino, Las Vegas 1968
 - Golden Nugget, Fremont Street Las Vegas, 1968
 - Casino entrance, Fremont Street Las Vegas, 1968
 - Flamingo Hotel and Casino sign Las Vegas, 1968
 - "Tower of Pizza" Las Vegas, 1971
 - Fremont Street looking west to Union Pacific Station, Las Vegas, 1971
 - The Mint Hotel and Casino Las Vegas, 1968
 - Stardust sign Las Vegas, 1968

- Fremont Street neon signs Las Veaas, 1968
- Stardust Hotel and Casino, neon lettering Las Vegas, 1968
- Stardust Hotel and Casino, entrance Las Vegas, 1971
- Caesars Palace Las Vegas, 1968
- Caesars Palace Hotel and Casino, entrance Las Vegas, 1966. Photo: Denise Scott Brown
- Las Vegas silhouettes, 1966 Photo: Denise Scott Brown
- Parking lot with Roman soldier, Caesars Palace Las Vegas 1966 Photo: Denise Scott Brown
- Figures of Romans and people, Caesers Palace, Las Vegas 1966 Photo: Denise Scott Brown
- Figures of Romans, Caesars Palace, Las Vegas, 1968
- Caesars Palace, entrance, Las Vegas, 1968

Note on attribution:

All photographs were taken by the students and instructors of "Learning from Las Vegas Research Studio" but an exact attribution is no longer possible in most cases. The instructors of the research were Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. The students of the studio were Ralph Carlson, Tony Farmer, Ron Filson, Glen Hodges, Peter Hoyt, Charles Korn, John Kranz, Peter Schlaifer, Peter Schmitt, Dan Scully, Doug Southworth, Martha Wagner and Tony Zunino.

Films Credits:

1. Footage from Las Vegas Research Studios Compilation 1968, Film 5'10" Courtesy James Venturi,

Light from Light Films, New York

2. Melbourne Interviews:

Leon van Schaik Tony Styant-Browne and John Gollings Corbett Lyon Howard Raggatt and Ian McDougall Rob McBride and Debbie Ryan Conrad Hamann Suzannah Waldron and Nick Searle

Films produced by Nervegna Reed Productions. Melbourne-based images courtesy of the interviewees. Las Vegas Studio images © Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates Inc., Philadelphia

3. Las Vegas Electric 1968, Film 2'35" Courtesy James Venturi, Light from Light Films, New York



Searle x Waldron Architecture is an emerging Melbourne practice co-founded by Nick Searle and Suzannah Waldron in 2007. Recent projects include winning the first stage of the MoCAPE international competition (Museum of Contemporary Art, Shenzhen, China) and an award-winning, multi-purpose Annexe for the Art Gallery of Ballarat.

RMIT Design Hub commissioned Searle x Waldron to design an exhibition environment that would respond specifically to the spaces within Design Hub, the touring exhibitions and the exhibition materials collected that trace the influence of Venturi and Scott Brown on the development of Melbourne's architectural culture.

Suzannah Waldron and Nick Searle reflect on their design in response to key slogans and phrases used within *Learning from Las Vegas*.

Lessons for the typical

The design of the Las Vegas Studio exhibition take lessons from the book. While the content of the exhibition is focused on the studio experience of studying the city – the book itself is almost not the objective – learning from the typical is. To design the exhibition we learnt from Learning from Las Vegas to reconstitute the two-dimensional photographs and films into a three dimensional qualitative and atmospheric experience.

Decoration is cheaper

The Las Vegas of the 60s was a cardboard cut-out city of maximum effects from minimal means where the \$100,000 sign sat on the \$10,000 stand. There were no glazed pyramids or Van Gogh's in the foyers. The materials of the exhibition echo the ordinary and cheap vs phenomena and veneer with liberal use of scaffolding, OSB board, flickering lights, thin decorative felt and plastic veneers.

The city is a set of intertwined activities

Each gallery abstracts a Las Vegas experience with speed and scale. A linear streetscape captures the deadpan view of the strip with roadside signs dispersed sparsely on approach from the outskirts. Las Vegas electric is captured with scaled signage structures acting as both heraldic marker and informative display. Photos from the Las Vegas Studio are salon hung; compressed and distributed, gapped with time, in sequences experienced on the strip. An Oasis marks the pause in velocity where books and media consumed by the Las Vegas Studio form a collection of poolside reads on reclining lounges.

Billboards are almost alright

The studio found that in Las Vegas navigation was communicated via the ground: in the exhibition, the ground is demarcated with zones of diagonal parallel lines indicating cross-overs. The book also found that 'if you take the signs away there is no place'. We put this observation in to practice with signs informing, directing and communicating the way around the disparate spaces of the exhibition. Revised as a sign, Surfers Paradise is reassembled on a 36m long billboard of photographs taken forty years apart. We also used signs also to obliquely query — is the Design Hub itself a decorated shed or duck?

I.M.Pei will never be happy on Route 66

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown analysed the commercial strip with fresh eyes to radical effect. Acknowledging popular culture and social activity, they disrupted the direction of architectural discourse. They leant from the banal and special, ugly and ordinary. The exhibition charts this legacy of their ideas on Melbourne with ephemera encased, and thoughts collected and projected amongst the flashing lights on the wall.

- Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in Las Vegas, 1968
- (3) Landscape leaving Las Vegas, ca. 1965. Photo: Denise Scott Brown
- 04 Las Vegas Strips Personal
 Perspective, 1968, Film 3'
 Courtesy James Venturi,
 Light from Light Films, New York
- Parking lot Las Vegas, 1971
- (6) Asphalt landscape with parking lot 1969
 Preparations for the film Las
- (07) Vegas Deadpan Las Vegas, 1968
- Students of the "Learning from Las Vegas Research Studio" arriving in Las Vegas, 1968
- (9) Las Vegas Strip 1971
- 10 Las Vegas Strip silhouettes 1966
 Photo: Denise Scott Brown
- (1) Las Vegas Strip silhouettes 1966 Photo: Denise Scott Brown
- Footage from Las Vegas Research
 Studio (slides), 1968, Film 1"50
 Las Vegas Helikopter Rides,
 1968, Film 2'10
 Courtesy James Venturi, Light
 from Light Films, New York
- (13) Circus Circus Hotel and
- Casino Las Vegas, 1968

 (14) Las Vegas Strip ca.1970
- Morocco Motel Las Vegas, ca.1968
- Gas Station Las Vegas, 1968
- Advertising signs on the Strip, Las Vegas 1968
- (8) Restaurant on the Strip
 Las Vegas, 1968
- (9) Images from Las Vegas Studio research Slide show 1. Courtesy of the curators
- Photo: Denise Scott Brown

- Golden Nugget Las Vegas, 1966.
- Photo: Denise Scott Brown
- Aladdin Hotel and Casino, entrance Las Vegas, 1968
- (23) Thunderbird Hotel and Casino,
- neon sign Las Vegas, 1968 Stardust Hotel and Casino,
- neon sign Las Vegas, 1968
 Images from Las Vegas Studio research
 Slide show 2. Courtesy of the curators
 - Stardust Hotel and Casino
 Las Vegas, ca. 1968
- (28) Image sequence, Lower Strip heading north, Las Vegas, 1968
- 29 Copy of Sculpture "Rape of the Sabines" by Giovanni Bolgna 1968
- Parking lot with the "Silver Slipper" Las Vegas Strip, 1968
- 31 Denise Scott Brown with students of the Las Vegas Research Studio 1968
- 32 Steven Izenour at the airport Las Vegas, 1968
- 33 Denise Scott Brown taking photographs in the "Silver Shop" Los Angeles, 1968
- Denise Scott Brown taking photograhs in the "Silver Shop" Los Angeles, 1968
- The Strip seen from the desert with Robert Venturi's silhouette 1966. Photo: Denise Scott Brown
- The Strip seen from the desert, with Denise Scott Brown in the foreground 1966. Photo: Robert Venturi
- Rooftop terrace, The Mint Hotel and Casino Las Vegas, 1968
- Las Vegas Deadpans 1968, Film, 8'. Courtesy James Venturi, Light from Light Films, New York

Las Vegas Studio: Images from the Archives of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown

John Gollings: Learning from Surfers Paradise

Acknowledgements:

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John Gollings: Learning from Surfers Paradise is developed by Gold Coast City Gallery with John Gollings. Curated by Virginia Rigney.

RMIT Design Hub exhibition curated by Fleur Watson.

Design Hub Curatorial and Production Team: Kate Rhodes, Nella Themelios, Erik North, Kate Riggs, Sarah Sandler, Tim McLeod, Marcin Wojcik, Thomas Muratore, Jeremy Fowlie, Audrey Thomas Hayes.

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Installation photography by Tobias Titz. www.tobiastitz.de

Opening Hours:

Tuesday to Friday, 11am - 6pm Saturday, 12-5pm

Closed Sunday and Mondays Closed Public Holidays

Admission is free Check the website to find out what's on

T-Sauare Club Cafe:

Monday - Friday 7.30am - 4pm

The Café is located in the forecourt and accessible via the Victoria Street entrance

Location:

Building 100, Corner Victoria and Swanston Streets, Carlton, 3053

Contact:

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