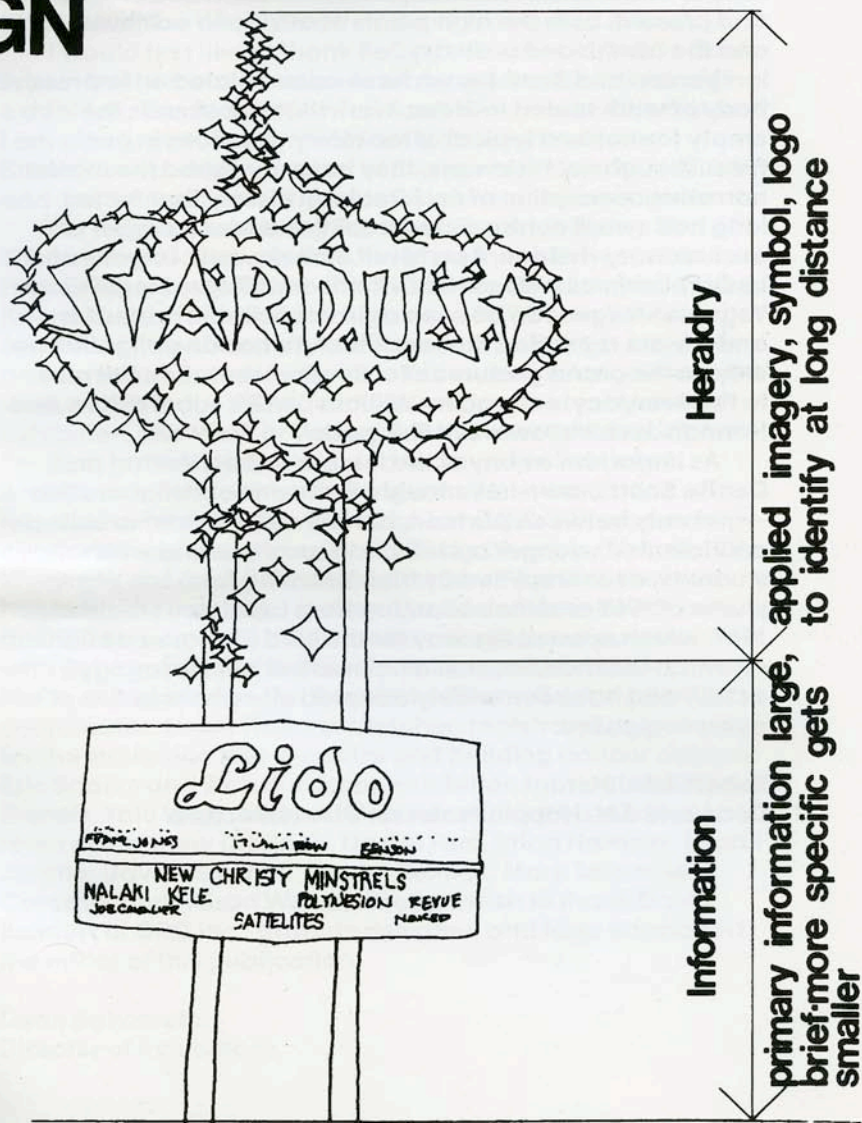




**What We Learned:
The Yale Las Vegas Studio
and the Work of Venturi,
Scott Brown and Associates**

**Yale School of Architecture Gallery
October 29, 2009 – February 5, 2010**

PHYSIOGNOMY OF A TYPICAL CASINO SIGN



Introduction

***What We Learned: The Yale Las Vegas Studio and the Work of Venturi Scott Brown and Associates* combines two independently organized exhibitions devoted to the teaching, research, and design work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. The first exhibition, *The Las Vegas Studio* is a traveling exhibition of over one hundred color photographs, slide projections, and original materials from the 1968 studio at Yale that resulted in the seminal book, *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972) by Venturi, Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour (MED '69). The Las Vegas exhibition was created by and originally presented by the Museum im Bellpark Kriens, Switzerland, in 2008. The second exhibition, *The Work of Venturi Scott Brown and Associates*, an exclusive presentation by the School of Architecture's Exhibition Program and curated by Dean Sakamoto with David Sadighian (MED '10), focuses on Venturi and Scott Brown's critical concepts and work of their Philadelphia-based firm that since the 1960s has had a profound impact, transforming late twentieth-century architecture and urbanism, as revealed in selected buildings, projects, books, decorative arts, and words organized in five thematic categories: Communication; Automobile City; Context; Urban Mapping and Research; and Mannerism, for this exhibition.**

In an interview with Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi at their Philadelphia office on July 24, 2009, Dean Sakamoto, Director of Exhibitions at Yale School of Architecture, discussed the ideas that shaped the exhibition, *What We Learned: The Yale Las Vegas Studio and the Work of Venturi Scott Brown and Associates*.

DEAN SAKAMOTO: Denise, how do you think people will perceive the "We" in "What We Learned"?

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: It could mean what Bob and I learned and VSBA practiced, though people will probably apply it more broadly to the architecture profession. Yet it could cover scholars and artists in general, because *Learning from Las Vegas* is used worldwide, and its readership extends beyond architecture into the humanities, social sciences, and arts.

ROBERT VENTURI: I've enjoyed learning

from many, many sources: from Denise; from Princeton, where I studied architectural history and engaged in modern design; and from travel, especially in cities. Every morning, while dressing, I revisit cities I love via the pictures on my wall: Rome, London, Paris, Toulouse, Geneva, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Prague, Venice, Florence, Tokyo, Shanghai; also Philadelphia, where I grew up, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Princeton, and of course Las Vegas—all mean so much to me. And I learn from their ordinary architecture, their everyday tissue, as well as from their finery. The idea of "learning from" is terribly significant to me.

Las Vegas

DEAN SAKAMOTO: The Las Vegas Studio involved on-site fieldwork in a phenomenological approach that set new standards for research in architecture. How did you blend the learning from both abstract concepts and real experiences?

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: Isn't that what we architects do? Doesn't moving from concept to object, from a verbal program to its physical accommodation, constitute the challenge of architecture?

ROBERT VENTURI: In the 1950s, when I started writing and designing, modernism was seen as revolutionary not evolutionary and history was considered irrelevant to it. Most architects did not look to the past for lessons. So when I wrote *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* and indicated I was learning from historical architecture, there was considerable misunderstanding. Architects felt I had proposed reviving historical styles and details directly in design. That was never the case. I was, as I explained, learning from history and learning to evolve out of it. But even this was shocking at the time, maybe not as shocking as learning from Las Vegas but shocking all the same. We had fun being shocking then.

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: When shocked people asked, "Well, what *did* you learn from Las Vegas?" our backs reared, first at their tone but also because what we learned was difficult to define. The lessons were complex and needed time. They might never be altogether clear. Our first, perhaps over-aggressive response was, "What did *you* learn from the Parthenon? You mean you can't put it in words? Well maybe we can't either."

ROBERT VENTURI: Learning from the vernacular was very significant. The ordinary has a long history in art and architecture. Seventeenth-century Dutch portrait painters chose middle-class subjects not aristocrats. And nineteenth-century artists painted peasants in everyday landscapes rather than nobility in ideal settings. But in the 1950s, American architects looked at ideal cities, at Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse and Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City, not at contemporary communities and urban life. And they acknowledged the automobile by decrying it. But in the 1960s, pushed by

English Brutalist architects, American social scientists and Pop Artists, we broke ranks and set off to research the automobile city of the American southwest. We turned first to Los Angeles, its prime manifestation, but found Las Vegas was purer, more concentrated and easier to study. And it offered the archetype, the most exaggerated version, of American auto land—The Strip. Today, Las Vegas Boulevard, which replaced The Strip, is a kind of scenographic Disneyland, very different from the Las Vegas that we learned from.

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: When we were in mid-career I used to tell Bob that we were in it for the long haul and asked him to be patient. Now that our careers are ending (there's kick in us yet!), an overview is possible. Because this exhibition spans the arc of our work, it may help to illuminate what we learned from Las Vegas. We hope people will perceive a fruition of our early ideas in our later projects, and that individuals will take what is useful to them from Las Vegas and from us.

Communication

ROBERT VENTURI: I would argue that, throughout history, communication via symbolism has been more significant in architectural expression than has space. Sure, space is part of architecture; after all, it houses activities. But it's clear from Egyptian hieroglyphics, Byzantine mosaics, Gothic stained glass and sculpture, and Renaissance frescoes and paintings, that communication and symbolism have always been integral with architecture. And although we see these as art (great art), they were only incidentally art; they were essentially communication.

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: Today communication is recognized once again as a function of architecture.

ROBERT VENTURI: And as an aid to the building of community.



Las Vegas Strip, 1966. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc.

Context

ROBERT VENTURI: In 1950 while searching for a subject for my Princeton master's thesis, I came upon the word *gestalt* in the psychology library. It meant wholeness in German, and stood for the idea that the part can be best understood in terms of the whole. In architecture, this suggested that a building derives its meaning from its setting, its context. I thought, "Oh God! That's it!" At that time, American architects were thinking mainly about function and space, but I concluded that planning and design should deal essentially with context—its expressive and symbolic as well as its functional aspects—and I initiated its reintroduction via my thesis. Context is often understood as mandating a match between object and surroundings. But you can harmonize via contrast or via analogy. The

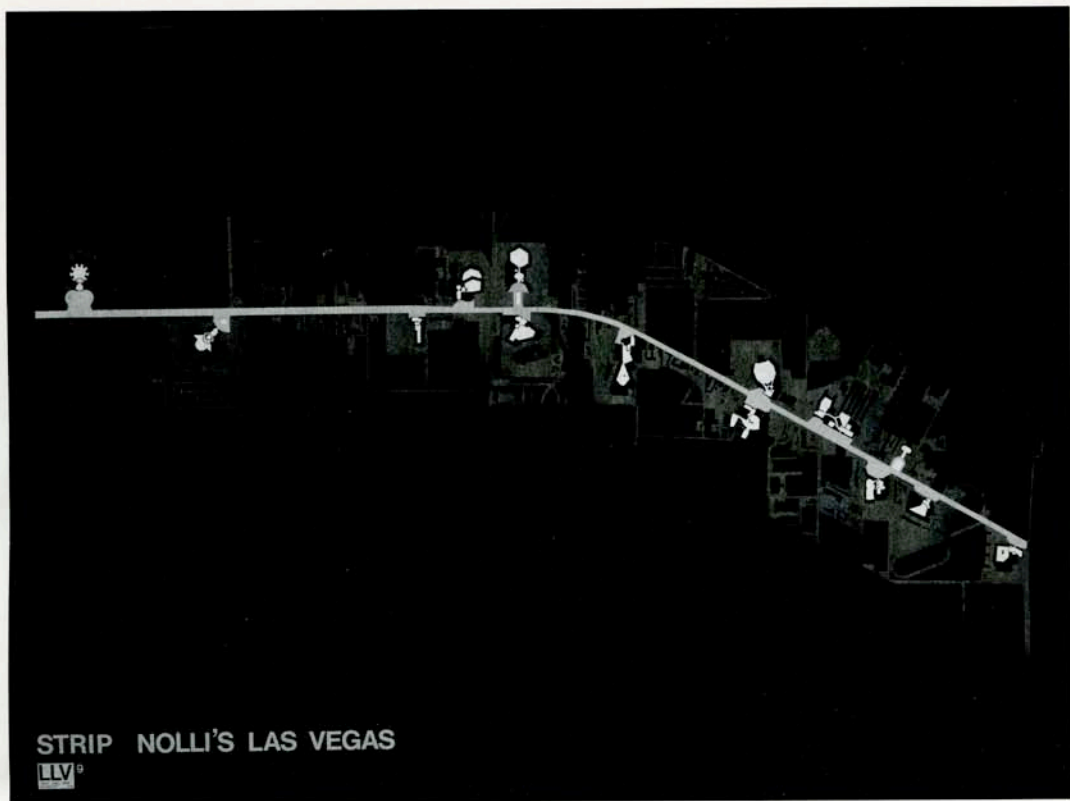
new building can stand out or tie in with its surroundings. Matching is not necessarily the issue, but fitting—connecting—is.

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: There's a chapter on context in *Architecture as Signs and Systems for a Mannerist Time...*

ROBERT VENTURI: ... and excerpts from my Master's thesis are published in *Iconography and Electronics upon a Generic Architecture*.

Automobile City

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: If you examine our designs but not our research you will miss half our work on the automobile city. Symbolism on The Strip was one subject of our study; patterns in the city another. Our



"Nolli's Las Vegas," the Yale Las Vegas Studio, 1968, Nolli mapping study of the Las Vegas Strip.
Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc.

activity mapping in Las Vegas showed that supermarkets were distributed evenly within neighborhoods much as they are in New Haven; and so were churches. But wedding chapels and auto rental offices clung to The Strip. In parallel with mapping the city's land use patterns, we tried mapping activities within casino hotels using standard land use colors—red for gambling, yellow for hotel rooms, green for patios etcetera. These maps revealed the organizational similarities that lay behind the decorative and thematic variety of casino plans and facades.

To illustrate the relation between private and public on The Strip, we adapted Giambattista Nolli's technique of 1748 for showing the streets, plazas, and churches of the pilgrims' way in Rome. Then we disaggregated Nolli.

One map showed all building footprints on The Strip; others all tarmac (Nolli did not have to deal with parking lots or the desert), every car in every parking lot, all "ceremonial space" (gambling lounges), and eventually the wording on every sign on The Strip. Our urban mapping studies have received less attention than our observations on signs, but they have exerted as great an influence on our own work. They gave us a feel for the combinations of activities and typologies in cities and they suggested new ways to approach design in architecture—what I call "land use and transportation planning *inside* buildings."

ROBERT VENTURI: Modern architects ignored signs, or thought they did, but even their cubist abstractions communicated a message, and in the automobile city, buildings,

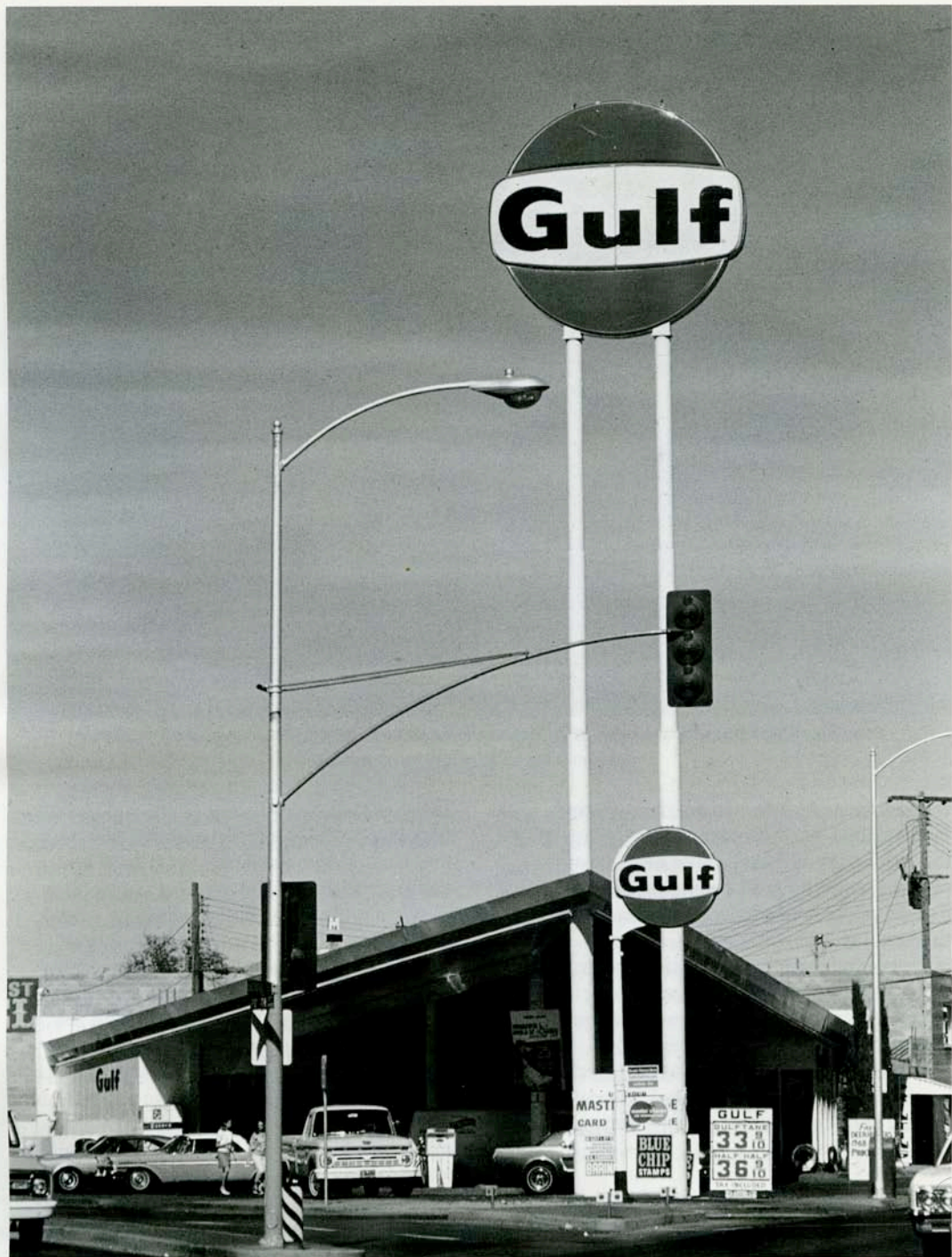


Showroom, Best Products Company, 1973–79, Langhorne, PA, side façade. Photograph by Matt Wargo

billboards, and highways are tied together inextricably. Yet this is not the birthplace of that relationship. Throughout the evolution of cities, signs have adorned Main Street or its equivalent. Old renderings even show them on the Piazza Navona. Classical architecture connected with signage indirectly, by using decorative symbolism as a form of communication. And this connection was strengthened when, in the 1920s, archaeologists discovered that the Greek temples had been multi-colored. Pure-white, formal and sculptural to us now, they once teemed with color.

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: Some commercial symbols of today, barber's poles for instance, date back to medieval times. Medieval signs remind me of Las Vegas. When we looked

deeply into signs, we came to the conclusion that, despite their colorful content, they were pieces of equipment. Their functional design was a surprising discovery. The contraption we call a billboard is designed as you would a camera and for the same reasons. It must suit the focal length and speed of movement of its viewers, be set at the right height and level of illumination, and be accessible for maintenance and change of message. Its structure must be economical yet highly wind-resistant. It must be demountable and reusable. It's a piece of ultra-functional design—go around the back to see just how functional it is. And its relationship to the wider landscape must be as carefully considered as that of any building. You may see it on axis a mile ahead of you on the highway, located as Camillo Sitte would have located a church tower.



Gulf gas station, Las Vegas, 1971. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc.

Urban Mapping and Research – Active Socioplastics

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: We research in order to design. As practitioners, we're involved in action, in making and doing and in teaching for making and doing. Urban mapping is only one form of research we undertook in Las Vegas, but it was important for its influence on our creative work, and particularly on our architecture.

In the book, *Having Words*, I describe Alison and Peter Smithson's concept, "active socioplastics." They used the term *socioplastics* to suggest tying together the social and the physical, creating physical containers for the social at different scales. The term *active* referred to the life of people on the streets and discovering means of learning about it—achieving vitality and allowing for change—what we were talking about in Las Vegas and what we are after in our research for design.

For us, urban mapping provides an aid to functional design. We recommend it to architects as a technique for achieving both the *active* and the *socioplastic* and as a way of broadening and updating our view of function. But it offers as well a potential for artistry. We are functionalists for mainly practical and moral reasons. However, when architects as good functionalists, shun dogma and listen carefully, they sometimes arrive at solutions that work well yet are shocking in their ugliness. But this may be where the art starts. Live with them a while—they may in the end seem beautiful. More than that, they may hold the key to a new sensibility emerging in response to altered social conditions.

Mannerism

ROBERT VENTURI: In the 1960s we were terrible and naughty. When revisiting Guild House (1963) recently, I remembered how I worried, while designing it, that the white stripe near the top of the building might be

decadent. And I placed a column at the center of the facade, creating a duality (a middle finger salute) at the main entrance. You go around the column to enter. And at a time when signs on buildings, if they were there at all, were small, unwelcome plaques, I placed a sign that dominated the facade over the entrance, saying "Guild House." The rules of composition say "You don't do those things!" But there they are. Architects now wonder why they were such a big deal, but the stripe and the sign were considered atrocious then.

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: Guild House is a mannerist building, it breaks the rules. Bob began to realize, as he left Rome, that mannerism was a major theme to be considered. And I had grown interested in it in England and Europe. So it was something we shared.

ROBERT VENTURI: *Complexity and Contradiction* (1966) is essentially about mannerism. The title was suggested by an old friend, a scholar of Jacobean poetry, and I'm glad I chose it because it's direct and not pompous. On the other hand, should I have called it "Mannerism and Architecture"? Mannerism was discerned or invented as an element of architecture in the mid-to-late sixteenth century. Living in Rome as a Fellow of the American Academy for two years, I was in heaven as I looked at Baroque, Baroque, Baroque. But just as I left, it dawned on me (as "context" had earlier), that Mannerism was really turning me on, that it was more significant to this complex and contradictory age than the Baroque.

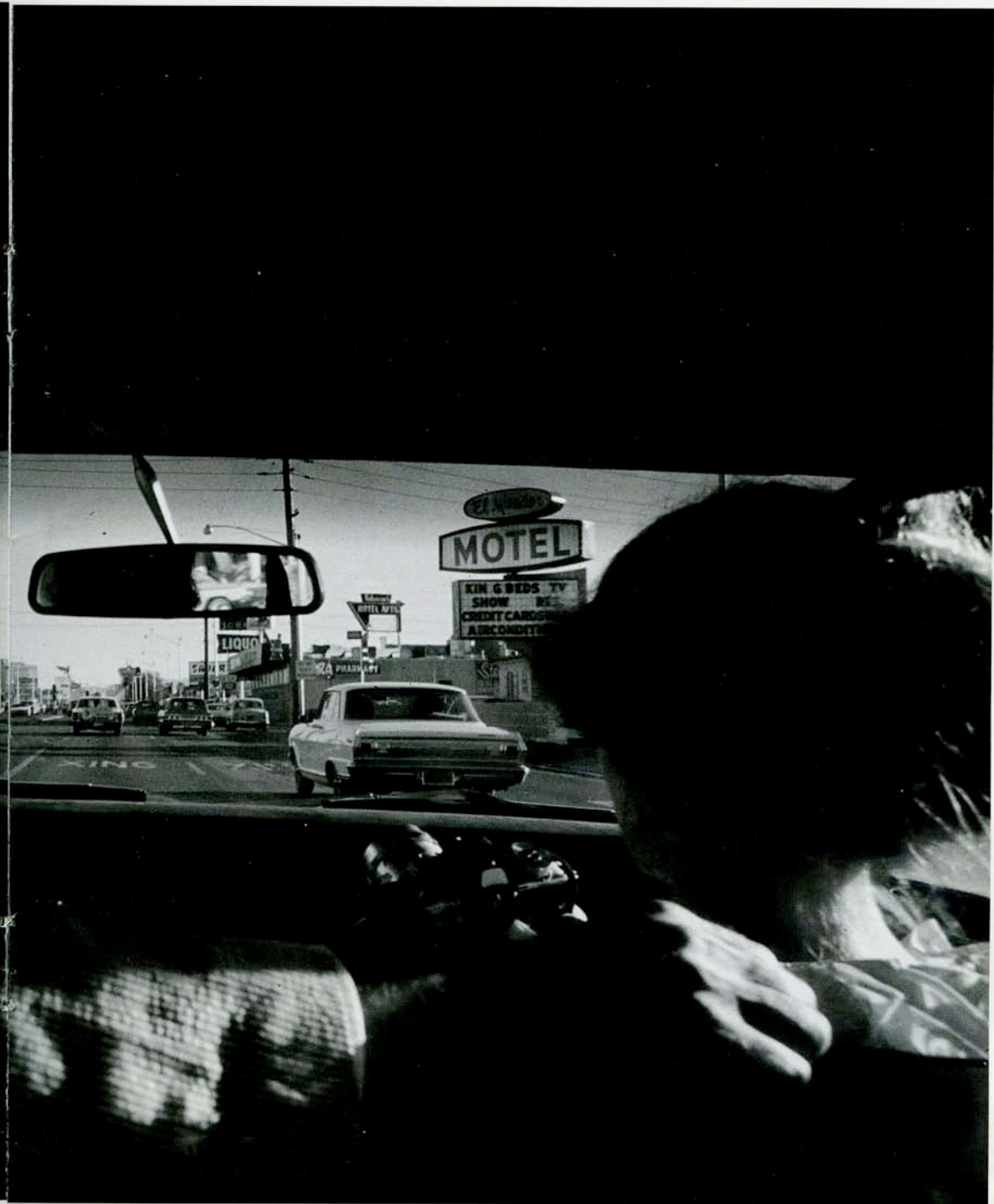
DENISE SCOTT BROWN: Mannerism was defined as decadent and neurotic, as the plaything of rich, spoiled-brat architects who liked breaking rules.

ROBERT VENTURI: Bored by the purity of the Renaissance, they turned to Mannerism.

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: But I came to see it as having other roles, particularly today

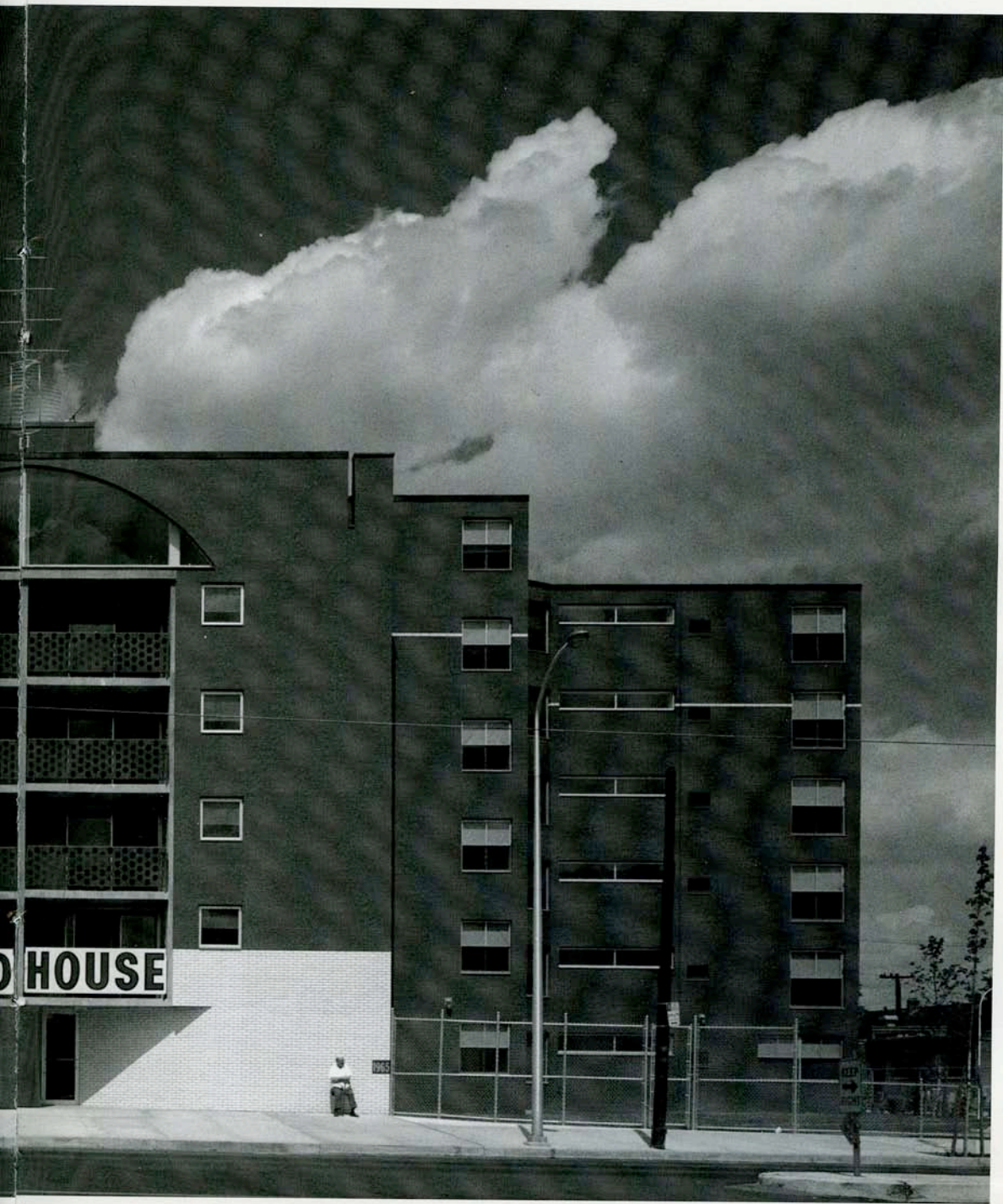


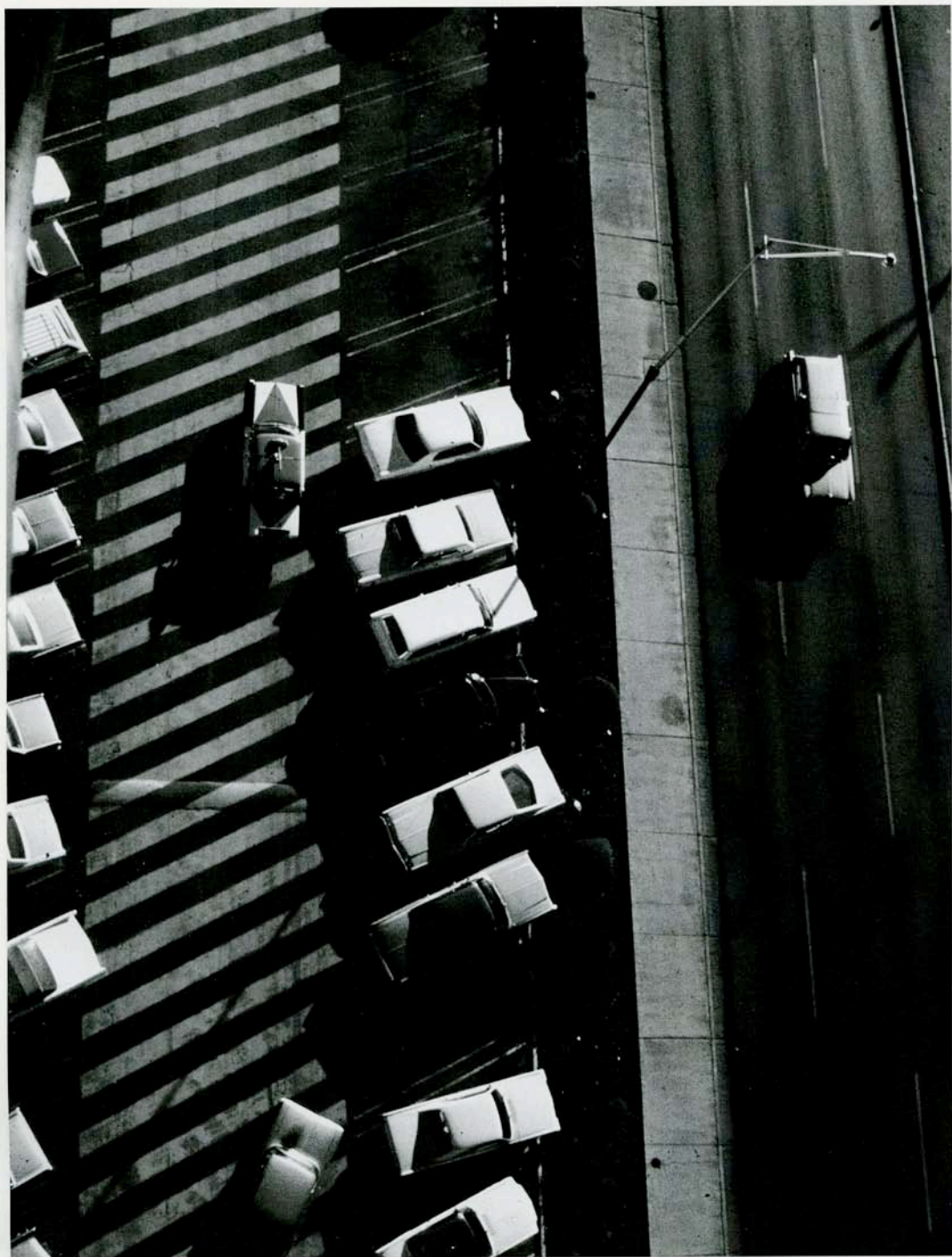
Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in Las Vegas, 1966. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc.





Guild House, Philadelphia, PA, 1967. Photograph by William Watkins





Parking lot on the Strip, Las Vegas, 1968. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc.

it as having other roles, particularly today in complex urban situations where you can't meet all demands equally well because some are in conflict with others. One solution is to push things under the rug, to achieve a great simple, glass-clad space, as Mies did at Crown Hall, by placing offices for administrative staff in a basement without light. An alternative would be to bend the rules of one system, say structure, to accommodate the needs of another, perhaps for uninterrupted workspace. In a mannerist Crown Hall, the high glass space and the secretaries' spaces would all be above ground, where the juxtaposition between their two scales might jar. And even if the conflicts were negotiated through sophisticated and brilliant rule breaking, the built result might not look pretty. But it would be stronger, better and perhaps even beautiful in an ugly sort of way. And a little humor might contribute to the meld, because if you didn't laugh you might cry.

So we think of Mannerism as humane, as serving and representing the human condition and our fractured times. Our position on it is elaborated in two sections of the book, *Architecture as Signs and Systems*—"New Mannerism rather than Old Expressionism," and "Mannerism Because You Can't Follow All the Rules of All the Systems All the Time."

Before and Beyond Building

ROBERT VENTURI: We've also designed furniture, fabrics, and decorative arts and all through our careers we've written and researched. When you're young or if you're radical and maybe ahead of your time, few clients will hire you. Painters don't need someone to retain them to do their thing. They can paint even if they're starving.

But our medium involves too much money to do on our own. When you can't do architecture you design in other media, or you teach or write; you analyze and theorize, first for yourself then for others — one way or another, you get your ideas off your chest.

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: As designers, we need to tease things out in our minds, to read and study in a range of dimensions and disciplines and at many scales. And we need to look around us, to learn from Rome, Tokyo, Las Vegas, and our own backyard. While designing, we react to what we've read and seen. In this sense, our working life forms a troika between looking and learning, writing and theorizing, designing and building. We jump between them in no particular order, but need all to do our work. We're not scholars. We take a maker's and doer's view of scholarship. But working via our troika requires that our office become a mini university as well as a place for practice. This is expensive, yet we can't see any other way. It's how we get our joy.

Advice for Students

DEAN SAKAMOTO: For our students, who will be the primary audience for this show, can you give some further insight about the Las Vegas Studio that you taught here over forty years ago? Why did you go? What was Las Vegas like then? What was it like working with the students during the late 1960s?

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: When you are passionate about a topic, when it consumes you and defines you, it can furnish excellent subject matter and a good framework for teaching studio. But mostly it provides a way of conveying passion. The Yale students, in return, gave us fifteen eager co-researchers, making us fifteen times more able to learn about what interested us. On their part, they gained passion and knowledge, developed commitment, learned methods, and had fun. Teachers and students shared and negotiated the education; we all worked extremely hard and were happy.

The studio pedagogy and structure were based on those I took and gave in planning school at the University of Pennsylvania. My studios there, which were for civic design and urban planning students, had a strong



Hotel Mielparque Nikko Kirifuri, 1992–97, Nikko, Japan, "village street" interior.
Photograph by Kawasumi Architectural Photograph Office



Freedom Plaza, 1977–79, Washington, D.C. Photograph by Tom Bernard

synthesizing research and design. At Yale the students were highly educated, sophisticated, and unusually able to take the initiative in forwarding their own education, yet they knew surprisingly little about urban life and social conditions. However, they approached these topics with energy and learned quickly. And they took in their stride the mandate (unusual in architecture then) to work in groups of varying sizes and to share their research with each other.

The studio subject matter was much more interdisciplinary than the norm for architecture, but we planned a looser intellectual and organizational structure at Yale than I had at Penn, and did not demand the interconnection of everything. Some subjects the students researched themselves; guest lecturers provided information on others; and for a couple (the one on permanence and change, for example) Bob and I provided

the boards. Our teaching assistant and later collaborator, Steve Izenour, used his boundless energy and resourcefulness in designing methods of production that would make everything work. Teaching at Yale was a great experience for us; the Las Vegas and Levittown studios were more challenging and more productive than any I had taught before and the book that resulted, *Learning from Las Vegas*, has been in print for nearly forty years.

ROBERT VENTURI: I enjoy telling students, Yale students especially, that although we hope you will learn from us, you should also be very open to your own responses—to what you see, to what you think as architects and individuals. Don't necessarily do what you're supposed to do. Getting to the bottom of what you are thinking, of what your responses really are, is also very relevant.

Yale School of Architecture © 2009
ISBN: 978-0-9820509-8-9

Exhibition Organization:

Dean Sakamoto, Director of Exhibitions
Dana Keeton, Exhibition Coordinator
Linda Thacher Visscher, Registrar

Exhibition Curators:

Hilar Stadler and Martino Stierli, *Las Vegas Studio*
Dean Sakamoto with David Sadighian, *The Work of
Venturi Scott Brown and Associates*

Exhibition Design:

Dean Sakamoto with David Sadighian, Vivian Hsu,
Craig Chapple, and Monica Perez del Rio

Exhibition Graphic Design:

Angie Hurlbut, AH Design

Publication Credits:

Nina Rappaport, Publication Editor
David Reinfurt, ORG inc., Design

*The Las Vegas Studio, Images from the Archives
of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown* exhibition
was produced by the Museum im Bellpark Kriens,
Switzerland.

This publication was made possible by the Rutherford
Trowbridge Memorial Publication Fund; the Paul
Rudolph Publication Fund, established by Claire
and Maurits Edersheim; the Robert A.M. Stern Fund,
established by Judy and Walter Hunt; and the Nitkin
Family Dean's Discretionary Fund in Architecture.

Inside front and back cover:

Fremont Street neon signs, Las Vegas, 1968 © Venturi,
Scott Brown and Associates, Inc., Philadelphia

This is number 32 in a series of Yale School of
Architecture exhibition publications.

FREMONT

CASINO

FREE PARKING
1 BLOCK SOUTH

BONUS DOUBLE JACKPOTS

5 TIMES DAILY 11:00 AM - 11:00 PM

NEVADA
CLUB

HIT A JACK
WIN A 1968
NEVADA

