

# Must They Mean What They Say?

## Eduardo Vivanco

*I AM A MONUMENT: On Learning from Las Vegas*

by Aron Vinegar.

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“Facing the implications of Las Vegas in our work is proving much more difficult than describing Las Vegas.”<sup>1</sup>

Traditional readings of *Learning from Las Vegas* have dealt with the implications Denise Scott Brown refers to, not necessarily only in her work with Robert Venturi, but in that of others as well. The interest and polemic of the book relied almost exclusively on how its content was translated into architecture, or why Las Vegas should be the model to follow. As a result, much has been written not on the book, but on those implications alone. This is why Aron Vinegar’s book was so needed and welcomed now.

It is true that neither Venturi nor Scott Brown have normally been very keen on criticism—the bad sort at least—of their work, and Venturi’s attitude has been closer to arrogant defiance than to modesty: “My favorite thing is when a critic accuses you of not doing such and such when you introduced the idea of such and such in the first place,” or “I’m sorry if you understand what I’m writing—please don’t hold it against me or it.”<sup>2</sup> Scott Brown, on the other hand, seems to have engaged more seriously in discussing criticism.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes one has the feeling that it is easier to agree with them than to have them agree with oneself.<sup>4</sup>

Vinegar’s compared reading of the two editions of *Learning from Las Vegas*<sup>5</sup> is an extremely refined inquiry into the nature of the experience of learning, and especially of learning from Las Vegas. His position in the text is both in consonance and dissonance with Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour (VSBI), thus working a certain harmony that enhances the original work’s strength. He writes: “It is up to us to find our own point of departure from that text, and this is predicated on our finding new ways to read and write the first and revised editions together. The criteria for how to do so are up to us, and our claim to speak for *Learning from Las Vegas*’s inheritance can begin only with our participation in the conversations it initiated, acknowledged, and avoided.”<sup>6</sup>

*I AM A MONUMENT* is a book about books, but it is much more than that.<sup>7</sup> It reflects on how we read a city, on the ability (or inability) of reading itself, and on writing about that experience. The

- 1 Denise Scott Brown, “Reply to Frampton,” *Casabella* 359–360 (1971): 43.
- 2 Venturi, Robert, *Iconography and Electronics Upon a Generic Architecture: A View from the Drafting Room* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 303, 306.
- 3 She recently wrote an excellent text on their work from a personal perspective, not apologetic, and less manifesto than what they had us used to. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Architecture as Signs and Systems: For a Mannerist Time* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004). She has also followed their work’s reception and responded to it. More on that later.
- 4 Koolhaas is aware of the paradoxical aspect (call it contradiction and complexity) of their oeuvre in this excerpt of an interview: “DSB: What we have done has allowed many people to think differently, therefore to do things differently. Over and over, people have told us that suddenly they could be themselves... / RK: Or they could be yourselves. / DSB: Well, the best ones thought it let them be themselves.” “Re-learning from Las Vegas. Interview with DSB & RV by Rem Koolhaas & Hans Ulrich Obrist” in Koolhaas, Rem, *Content* (Taschen, 2004).
- 5 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972, 1977).

- 6 Aron Vinegar, *I AM A MONUMENT: On Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 171. Thus, Vinegar does not claim his as the right reading and writing of these books, hence his decision to include Scully's unpublished introduction as Appendix, which serves him also for introducing questions about the nature of VSBA's partnership, and their aversion to what he calls "the third": "that is, anyone or anything that disrupts the 'internal' cohesion or communication of a system, group, or entity, and in response is given a supplementary status, disavowed, or deemed as 'merely outer.'" op. cit., 123. Scully serves as a "counterpoint on symbolism," a "yardstick." See also the interview with Beatriz Colomina and the latest critique of Scully's relation to Venturi by Scott Brown in Andrew Blauvelt, ed., *Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscape* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2008).
- 7 That is at least the impression one gets after merely browsing the book by its illustrations: almost hundred figures of which a quarter are original and/or never published before and the rest are parts of books. We would be looking at covers (the one of this book includes the two original books, showing us instantly their relation in size), complete pages (over twenty-five), and figures from other books. The new material consists mainly of the unpublished mock up, archive photos, posters, layouts, table of contents and annotated pages. The "I AM A MONUMENT" diagram is included twice, and to my surprise, given Vinegar's extreme attention at dedication, nothing is being said about its over-drawing from the first to the second edition.
- 8 Such was the intended title for this book, the same as a seminal essay on this subject: Aron Vinegar, "SKEPTICISM AND THE ORDINARY: From Burnt Norton To Las Vegas," *Visible Language* 37: 3 (2003): 288–311. That was an special issue he guest co-edited with Michael Golec, entitled *Instruction and Provocation, on Learning from Las Vegas*. They have recently co-edited: *Relearning from Las Vegas* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

absence of direct references to buildings is deceiving—this book is as much about architecture as it is about language, philosophy, or books. If "Facing the implications of Las Vegas in our work is proving much more difficult than describing Las Vegas," Vinegar here focus on the latter. It is not on how to build after some book, but rather on how to *book* after some buildings. It is a book about translation, both conceptual (into different languages) and literal (moving from one place to another). It is also a book about skepticism and the ordinary, yet it works as a well-crafted clock.<sup>8</sup> One can tell it has been worked over a great deal of times. Vinegar is brilliant and playful, and the way he has paced the book responds to his intention to drive us through the text with the aid of mini-chapters within each chapter, thus accelerating the reading (with the help of extensive footnotes at the end of the book, just as in this review) and provoking the same wonder and ambivalence it talks about. The text is rich in shifts, subtleties, and unconventional yet convincing reading of images, which give us deep insights into the nature of what otherwise would be taking for granted—i.e., the ordinary.

If we are to agree with Walter Benjamin that "Critique seeks the truth content of a work of art; commentary, its material content," this book attempts both. It starts with a critique and moves towards a commentary, since, "More and more, therefore, the interpretation of what is striking and curious—that is, the material content—becomes a prerequisite for any later critic."<sup>9</sup> The inquiry into the material content of *Learning from Las Vegas* led Vinegar into a vast research project that makes *I AM A MONUMENT* a must for designers of architecture as well as books. Even though this book is divided into five chapters plus appendix, I understand it to function in three major moments describing chronologically the "Learning from Las Vegas Studio" experience: in the car, at the studio, and in the books.

### In the Car

In the introduction and the chapters "Approaching Las Vegas in Wonder and Ambivalence" and "Our City of Words," Vinegar goes straight to his coupling of *Learning from Las Vegas* with skepticism and the ordinary. "A strict adherence to critical theory-based interpretation," Vinegar writes, "obscures the subtle aversive criticism that *Learning from Las Vegas* demonstrates, and which can easily be misinterpreted as uncritical collusion with the culture industry. Approaching *Learning from Las Vegas* from the implications of its skeptical voice thus radically undermines three dominant and erroneous characterizations of the text: that it is playfully ironic postmodern approach to architecture; that it maintains a straightforward equation of architecture with unproblematic communication; and that it is complicit with the culture industry. In other words, the book is much more *critically* and *ethically* charged than has previously been assumed."<sup>10</sup> After such a statement, one would

expect an entrenchment with the authors of that book, but Vinegar has internalized what Venturi wrote years ago: “Louis Kahn has referred to ‘what a thing wants to be,’ but implicit in this statement is its opposite: what the architect wants the thing to be.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, Vinegar is suspicious of what the architects (VSBI) want the thing (Las Vegas) to be. Here the thing could be its meaning and/or the book.

It is not a coincidence that the first view of Las Vegas we get in Vinegar’s book is a photograph of the Strip taken from the back-seat of a car driven by Venturi with Scott Brown as copilot.<sup>12</sup> That’s the space Vinegar occupies initially to reconsider the themes and concerns of *Learning from Las Vegas*. He is not alone in that back-seat; Vinegar brings in philosopher Stanley Cavell’s interpretation of skepticism and the rich philosophical tradition that Cavell is engaged with. “For Cavell, skepticism is not fundamentally triggered by our perceived lack of knowledge of the world, as it has traditionally been cast. Rather, it is related to how we respond to and take responsibility for that world. Cavell’s key term for this thought is ‘acknowledgment,’ a word that is meant not as an alternative to knowledge but rather as an interpretation of it.”<sup>13</sup> Vinegar’s pairing of skepticism and the ordinary with Las Vegas gives us also the more plausible explanation of why we were to learn from such a city: “and where better to explore these concepts than in a book about Las Vegas, a city that, according to many, is the scene of sensory overload, illusion, and deception?”<sup>14</sup> Note how “a book about Las Vegas” is key here, since it exposes the position that *I AM A MONUMENT* physically takes and that coincides with the one in the initial photograph—right behind Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, while they are learning from Las Vegas (or to put it in an even more graphic context—as if we were right behind a painter, looking over his shoulder at both the landscape and the canvas being painted.)

*I AM A MONUMENT* succeeds at rewriting *Learning from Las Vegas*, at re-experiencing the agony of the encounter with Las Vegas in wonder and ambivalence, the “intolerable wrestle with words and meanings.”<sup>15</sup> Here, wonder is the first requirement for our “acknowledgment” of the world, and “ambivalence is Venturi and Scott Brown’s attempt to prolong their state of wonder through the oscillating rhythms of love and hate.”<sup>16</sup> What are we acknowledging? The “ordinary,” which “does not refer merely to words that are widely used, to vernacular architecture, or to our everyday consumer culture. It can refer to anything in the world we might take an interest in.” Not merely looking at books, but also, for instance, at billboards, in day and night, in wonder, in disorientation. Thus, *I AM A MONUMENT* is also a book about the role of words in books, books that read buildings which speak in signs yet again made of words, about “our city of words.” It is ultimately a book about architecture in spite of architects. Vinegar follows Benjamin’s advice “never trust what writers say about their own writings,”<sup>17</sup> and pays fair but little attention to the description that architects give of their

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- 9 “Critique (*Kritik*) seeks the truth content (*Warheitsgehalt*) of a work of art; commentary (*Kommentar*), its material content (*Sachgehalt*.” From “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” (*Goethes Wahlverwandschaften*): Benjamin, Walter, *Abhandlungen, Gesammelte Schriften, Band I-1* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 123.
- 10 *I AM A MONUMENT*, 6–7.
- 11 Venturi, Robert, *Complexity and Contradiction* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 13.
- 12 Fig 1.1. *IAAM*, 14.
- 13 *IAAM*, 3. This book is as much about *Learning from Las Vegas* as it is about Cavell’s work. Nonetheless, other thinkers dialogue with Vinegar here, most significantly Jean-Luc Nancy, along with: Derrida, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Freud, Lacan, Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, Elliot, Emerson, and Thoreau.
- 14 *IAAM*, 3.

15 *Learning from Las Vegas*, 60. It is worth noting here that whereas according to Scott Brown, "Frampton misses the agony in our acceptance of pop," Vinegar gets away with the difficult (and at times embarrassing) debate that took place in the pages of *Casabella* 359–360. The texts "Learning from Pop, by Scott Brown," "America 1960–1970. Notes on Urban Images and Theory," by Kenneth Frampton, and "Reply to Frampton," by Scott Brown, are briefly revisited by Vinegar in page 35: "As Venturi and Scott Brown note: 'Manipulation is not the monopoly of crass commercialism'. Any drive to firmly demarcate the 'manipulative city of kitsch' (in Kenneth Frampton's words) from what Socrates in the *Republic* calls 'our city of words'—the ideal rather than the actual city—is a deception in its own right." What Scott Brown denounced in *Casabella*: "modern architects and critics seem to equate analysis of physical properties with lack of social concern. This is a 'non sequitur.'" is completely bypassed by Vinegar. Still, Venturi finds other attributes in Vegas that made it excellent for the studio experience: "A mannerist architecture of communication also involves learning from Tokyo—a city of now, a city of valid chaos rather than minimalist order. So we go from Rome, to Las Vegas, to Tokyo—to a city largely rebuilt in the last half-century, combining both revolutionary grandeur and evolutionary pragmatism." *Architecture as Signs and Systems: for a Mannerist Time*, 93. Was *Learning from Las Vegas* a strong reaction to Peter Blake's *God's Own Junkyard*? Why Las Vegas for VSBI? Was it a generic place for them or specific? They don't seem to like it anymore. Maybe it was as fictitious as Virgil, Texas, the town where David Byrne's deadpan *Trues Stories* happened. I can only think of a better reason for choosing Las Vegas, and that is when Francis F. Coppola decided to set *One from the Heart* there instead of in Chicago. He explains in the DVD commentary that since it was a movie about love, and love involved taking risks, it had to Vegas since that was the place where people went to make the biggest bids.

own buildings. His interest in *Learning from Las Vegas* "involves questioning why people speak the way they do, and how our investment in words, and architecture, is constitutive of the way we live, mean, and love, or avoid doing so."<sup>18</sup>

Vinegar's readings of passages from *Learning from Las Vegas* form a constellation of remarkable and delightful moments. For example, in his analysis of the dust jacket of the first edition, the metaphor he poses of sentences made from the words in neon signs as a ransom note brilliantly bridges Cavell's "arrogation of voice" with the idea of community based on communication. And this should be the greater project of *Learning from Las Vegas*. Thus, Vinegar sees Venturi and Scott Brown as "modestly ambitious" since "they are calling for new 'readers' of the city, and the reading they are engaged in cannot be reduced to semantics, semiotic decoding, or even isolated to the linguistic realm at all; it is a reading that is achieved by asking a question and going on 'from' that question, not by seeking an answer."<sup>19</sup>

### At the Studio

There is yet another excellent photograph on the process of *Learning from Las Vegas* that follows the logic of inquiry explained above.<sup>20</sup> In it, we can see at least nine people in the "Learning from Las Vegas Studio" at work, and there seem to be two simultaneous discussions among the participants, apparently without hierarchy. I imagine Vinegar stepping out of the car and joining the group at this moment in the book, and dealing with "asking a question and going on 'from' that question, not by seeking an answer." The chapters "Of Ducks, Decorated Sheds, and Other Minds," and "A Monument for Everyone and No One" deal with the content of *Learning from Las Vegas*, that is, the content of the studio—i.e., what was learned from Las Vegas.

The deadpan and the community dwell in these two chapters, which are possibly the most dense conceptually, and are crowded with fast, penetrating insights. The prose is fast, as Vinegar blinks from buildings to faces, from the "eye" to the "I," from blinking signs to Nietzsche's *Last Man*. One is rapt (if not captured) with the sophisticated and intricate web of reflections woven by Vinegar. The writing is contagious and poetic, since polysemy is urgently required by the subject matters—i.e., "the skeptical dilemma in *Learning from Las Vegas*," which "is really brought to the fore through the 'indiscrete' comparison between the Duck and the Decorated Shed."<sup>21</sup> With "The Duck as Melodrama of Expression" and "The Decorated Shed and the Melodrama of Inexpression," Vinegar is picking up where Manfredo Tafuri left off at the end of *The Sphere and The Labyrinth*: "not by accident is the interview granted by Venturi and Denise Scott Brown to Stani[slaus] von Moos in October 1974 titled, *Laughing Not to Cry*, the real problem lies completely in that title: why does the alternative between laughing and crying never get listed?

- 16 *IAAM*, 15. "One must entertain the possibility that philosophical problems might also begin with disorientation."
- 17 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 203.
- 18 *IAAM*, 6. There is one point in the book where the reader has to acknowledge that Cavell is more than the background or a collection of footnotes in this book. The ordinary here is anchored in ordinary language philosophy, and thus is different from contemporary discourses on the everyday and the vernacular. A great text on that approach is: Deborah Fausch, "Ugly and Ordinary: The Representation of the Everyday," in *Architecture of the Everyday*, ed. Steven Harris and Deborah Berke (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 75–106. In its last page: "The question raised by the work of Venturi and Scott Brown—can the public art of architecture succeed in displaying the ordinary, unmarked events of everyday life in its forms, or can it only accommodate and shelter them?—remains unresolved."
- 19 *IAAM*, 23.
- 20 Fig 5.28. *IAAM*, 162.
- 21 *IAAM*, 48.
- 22 Tafuri, Manfredo, *The Sphere And The Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 302. Vinegar's dismissal of Tafuri is understandable, but its inclusion could have been productive since they both share the awareness but from different perspectives. "Previously, Tafuri on page 294: "If Kahn could have produced a school of mystics without religions to defend, Venturi has in fact created a school of the disenchanted without any values to transgress. Nevertheless, both are part of one and the same ideology of self-reflection. Both, that is, surpass the limits of their own historic situation by embodying an attitude widespread among the fringes of expatriated intellectuals, who have made a country out of their exile. Like Bataille, but in a completely different manner and with other instruments, they have upturned the globe of the eye toward its cavity, in order not to become blinded by a universe in which the glance risks being extinguished."

Why, in other words, identify architecture with an 'object of feeling'? And furthermore, why identify pleasure with a masked ball?"<sup>22</sup> In *I AM A MONUMENT* the "real problem" is solved by Vinegar with the issue of expression and inexpression (the deadpan).<sup>23</sup> "Venturi and Scott Brown's interest in the 'deadpan' as both a technique and a disposition—exemplified for them in Ed Ruscha's photographs and art books—is directly related to their attempt to disperse attention in order to evoke an equanimity and responsiveness that might point the way to a 'new vision of the very imminent world around us.'"<sup>24</sup>

Using Cavell's take on Buster Keaton, Vinegar engages with the concept of the deadpan, so dear to Scott Brown,<sup>25</sup> but this time Vinegar finds it not only on photographs of facades, but on facades themselves, embracing their literal meaning as the face of a building.<sup>26</sup> The deadpan and the Decorated Shed work here as a node where the diagrams depict faces, and thus "it would seem that, despite their apparent opposition, both the Duck and the Decorated Shed share an overarching proposition: if there is a 'disconnection' between eyes, body, feeling, and voice, then perhaps we need to rethink that condition in order to see how we might reconfigure our *sense* of what architecture is and can be." Despite the seriousness of the claim, Vinegar amuses himself, to the enjoyment of the reader. He plays with facades, comic balloons, and arrives at one of the most critical yet convincing arguments—the question of fantasy and reality in Cavellian terms. "It would appear that the Duck and the Decorated Shed operate as highly mobile, supple, and chiasmatically entwined terms—and at crucial points, each incorporates the other in order to survive."<sup>27</sup> He then moves to Cavell's "melodrama of unknowingness" as "one of splitting the other, as between outside and inside" and to the "fragility of voicing."<sup>28</sup>

### In the Books

Vinegar's photograph of the presentation boards for the "Edward Ruscha elevations of the Strip" present us with the problem of bringing studio material into books.<sup>29</sup> How to do this implies not merely matters of size and scale, but mostly of design. Muriel Cooper, who designed the first edition tells us that "What [VSBI] wanted most was a Duck, not a Decorated Shed. I gave them a Duck,"<sup>30</sup> and Scott Brown's reply was "Could this page be revised because its composition is like a duck?"<sup>31</sup> A different sort of struggle was yet to take place. No wonder that *Reducks*, 1972, 1977 is Vinegar's pun to title the last chapter. The edition of 1977 is presented—with more than enough evidence—as *Learning from Las Vegas, the Director's Cut*<sup>32</sup> and, at the same time, as a new sort of Duck.

Vinegar is in this last part with his camera, the scanner, lenses, and his eye (as well as his "I") on the books. The two editions in comparison are contrasted with the mock up of an alternative third one, original layouts, annotations, phone calls, and letter exchanges. We are witnesses to a private investigation to determine who killed

- 23 *IAAM*, 58. "Although Venturi and Scott Brown's comparison of the Decorated Shed with the Duck is, in a sense, such a critique [of an *architecture parlante*], it does not deny the fact that we are nevertheless still tethered to our words and, more specifically, to our voice in those words. Thus, the issue of expression and inexpression and their relative 'articulations' are at the heart of the comparison between the Duck and the Decorated Shed."
- 24 *IAAM*, 32.
- 25 It appears frequently in recent account of *Learning from Las Vegas*. I think the first one was by Denisse Scott Brown "Reply to Frampton": "Ruscha is not nonjudgmental, he is deadpan. You don't have to be expressionistic to prove you have values."
- 26 *IAAM*, 83 Vinegar's description of Vanna Venturi' house (1962) "The clapboard front and back denoting 'home' is merely a flat appliqué that provides a 'sandwich' for the middle ground of the interior 'lived' space." See also the readings of the diagrams of the Duck and the Decorated Shed with "two window-eyes and door-nose, but no mouth."
- 27 *IAAM*, 53–54.
- 28 *IAAM*, 67–70. "In an act of architectural ventriloquism, the 'voice' of architecture is separated from its body in the Decorated Shed."
- 29 Fig 5.26, photograph by Aron Vinegar, by permission of VSBA, Inc. *IAAM*, 157.
- 30 Muriel Cooper quoted after Abrams, *IAAM*, 117.
- 31 Denisse Scott Brown. *IAAM*, 117.
- 32 *IAAM*, 117. "Although it took until 1975 for the revised edition to begin to move forward, such a book was imagined even while the first edition was advancing toward production. As Roger Conover explained to me, the revised edition "evolved as a kind of settlement of the two disappointed author's reservations about the design of the first editions; rather than compromise Cooper's design, the Press agreed to give the Venturis their own uncompromised design in the second round"
- 33 This last chapter takes as starting point Golec's essay, and so is acknowledged in the book. Michael Golec, "Doing It Deadpan," *Visible Language* 37:3 (2003): 266–287.

the Decorated Shed.<sup>33</sup> "The revised paperback edition did not merely replace the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, published five years earlier by the same press; for all practical purposes, it erased the memory of it."<sup>34</sup>

It is in "Total Design and Total Control at the Heart of the Skeptical Dilemma," one of the key chapters, where Vinegar achieves something ultimately unexpected from this book. For the first time in the literature on VSBA we get a better idea of Venturi and Scott Brown's design philosophy. By comparing the two editions, we get more information than with any other comparison of their buildings with their ideas. "That language [mobilized by Venturi and Scott Brown to describe the relationship between the two editions], particularly the phrase 'stripped and newly clothed,' will be closely attended to, as it raises questions about the relationships between inner and outer, acknowledgment and avoidance, violence and the text, that intimately link issues of skepticism with the conflict over the design of *Learning from Las Vegas*. As we shall see in more 'graphic' detail than in previous chapters, the tone of these writers and designers is inseparable from what a page of their book might look like."<sup>35</sup> Vinegar has found gold and keeps digging.<sup>36</sup> The struggle over the relationship between form and content is dramatically exemplified in the conflict between Cooper and Venturi and Scott Brown over the cloth cover and dust jacket of the first edition. The reader is a privileged witness to the process as Scott Brown complains: "The cover as designed is absolutely unacceptable: leaving out questions of good or bad design, it is inappropriate. It is against the philosophy of the book; it is a duck—*heroic and original*—almost fruity in its appearance. This is a serious study with a serious text and deserves a dignified conventional image. The shock must come from the contents inside the book . . . We have shown Muriel what we mean in sketches."<sup>37</sup>

We finally read Vinegar stating his differences with Venturi and Scott Brown who "seemed unable to acknowledge that issues of illegibility and unreadability might be *internal* to issues of communicability as such, and not *external* disruptions of communication and/or the result to a particular design philosophy."<sup>38</sup> Close to the end of the book, it is clear that "[i]n the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, one gets a real sense of experimentation in the literal meaning of that word: an exploration of (shared) experience at the limit of sense" whereas the second edition "distances itself" from that experience, but "most importantly, it distances itself from the studio experience."<sup>39</sup> To this Scott Brown has already responded:<sup>40</sup> "However we were able to reject Muriel's cover (which included bubble wrap as motif) and to design one of our own. Its type face, color, and inset picture (based on cigarette-card albums of my childhood) and its deadpan axial arrangement, simulating a scholarly tome, were intended to play against its outrageous content, as part of a game of melding pop culture, high culture and high jinx—our kind,

- 34 IAAM, 111.
- 35 IAAM, 112. The traditional explanation to the second edition keeps being repeated. "Our idea was to make a small, cheap, readable book whose graphic layout followed the principles laid down in the cover design: don't upstage your subject, look scholarly in form while being outrageous in content (note, Bob wears Books Bros. clothes) and, for this version, let it seem like a text book—deadpan. The second edition cover is based on the first but is altered for its smaller, cheaper, format." Scott Brown in *Supercrit #2: 'Learning from Las Vegas', Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown*, ed. Kester Rattenbury, and Samantha Hardigham (New York: Routledge, Architecture and Architectural Design, 2007), 18.
- 36 IAAM, 146. "At times these interventions involved minute details, literally down to the last millimeter: "Captions, I think are a smidgeon too close to the figures perhaps 1mm. . . I think Mario should try to drop them very slightly if he can."
- 37 IAAM, 121. Letter from VSB to Michael Conelly on the bubble-wrap jacket. On page 167, referring to Fig. 5.33. *Piemonte, attraverso l'Italia*, an old Italian touring book published in 1941, Scott Brown liked its "retardaire aesthetic" which seemed to reflect a "true monograph format" and the "standard textbook design" they were looking for. This is congruent with Venturi's Claim in *Iconography and electronics upon a generic architecture*, 309: "Oh, how we would love to show off architecturally—but we must do it only when and if its appropriate: the majority of our work is for institutions where we make reticent backgrounds, or for museums where we avoid one-upping the art."
- 38 IAAM, 126, 147: "Their *own* investment in total design is clearly something they had difficulty acknowledging. (...) there are clearly aspects of their work that simply reconstitute the very positions they are critiquing."

not Muriel's. She tried to hide this host of sins with a Helvetica-bedecked, glassine dust jacket. We hated this H&O ('Heroic and Original') fig leaf but I'm told that, where it survives, it adds to the selling price of the book."<sup>41</sup> Yet, that is not convincing. Not only did we (the readers) lose with the *reduckization* but, as Vinegar so clearly states, it worked against them as well: "Although the revised edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* established Venturi and Scott Brown's reputation and fame, like all important books it contributes to its own misreading. And this was due, in no small part, to the design of the revised edition. The dramatized comparisons and amplified polemic no doubt contributed to the interpretation of *Learning from Las Vegas* as a 'manifesto' of postmodernism, or at the very least its most 'exemplary' text."<sup>42</sup>

### Learning from Learning from Learning from Las Vegas

A manifesto? The most exemplary text of postmodernism? Thank Vinegar for a farewell to all that, and a welcoming of *Learning from Las Vegas*. He has re-read and re-written a text that had lost its influence on new generations, and as result, is back with a vengeance.

One last note on Vinegar on Venturi and Scott Brown: at first I thought Vinegar was surprisingly generous when crediting the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* for their "unthought" and for trusting that they "evidence their involvement with skepticism and the threat of nihilism in *Learning from Las Vegas* through the erasure of context and the denial of shared meaning, but also through the possible recoveries of shared meaning and context."<sup>43</sup> Was he not being too modest? I later realized he was reading more into their blindness than their insights. He was thus, to put it in a Venturian way, more for "both-and rather than either-or."<sup>44</sup> I wrote above about this book being both a critique and a commentary. It is also both a private writing and one that aims at public mission in Richard Rorty's terms.<sup>45</sup> Had Vinegar opted for Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* instead of Cavell's ordinary, skepticism, and the community as the contrasting lens for reading *Learning from Las Vegas*, he would not have come to the perfect marriage that *I AM A MONUMENT* is. Were he to take the "manifesto" aspect literally, or try to develop irony as a key element, would we have missed what is today productive from *Learning from Las Vegas*?<sup>46</sup> Strictly speaking, there is no objective or historical reason for reading Cavell with Venturi or Scott Brown,<sup>47</sup> we have no evidence of any sort of influence in either way, and it is always hard to say whether Venturi is closer to pragmatism or Scott Brown to post-colonial theory. Vinegar wastes no ink on that. Why would he? Why would we want him to? Do we need to know about their philosophical leanings? Must they mean what they say? Are they winking or blinking? How can we ever know what they think? We can merely know what they've done.

If the *Recommendation For a Monument* were to be more than a wink,<sup>48</sup> and if we were to follow the new motto "*Viva* the mitten with

39 /AAM, 160. Vinegar shows agreement with Golec in "Doing it deadpan." On 268: "While it is very difficult to measure whether or not all readers experience the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* in similar ways, it is fair to say that an experience of the first edition is distinct from an experience of the revised edition. The latter experience pales in comparison." and on 287 "they [VSBI] effectively foiled their initial goal," the second edition is "a book that is far less ambitious in its ability to envision Las Vegas as 'an object lesson in complex relationships.'"

40 Responding to Golec in "Doing it deadpan." In 287 "The apparent incommensurability of subjective judgment and objectivity instantiated in the differences between the dynamic (or subjective) first edition and the deadpan (or objective) revised edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* are further complicated by the fact that Cooper's design is in keeping with the subject matter of the author's text. In fact, it is my contention that, in spite of Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's misgivings and Scott Brown's redesign, Cooper's design fully realizes the author's desire to imagine the city in textual and visual representations that establish identifiable sets of schematic instructions to construct corresponding images of Las Vegas in the mind. It was, in fact, Cooper, not Scott Brown, who represented "the strip as perceived by Mr.A rather than as a piece of geometry." Scott Brown's response: "Some critics have accused us of trying for a 'false objectivity' that has been belied by modern science—as if they were the only ones to have heard of Einstein. But our approach was, of course, subjective: it's just that U&O ('Ugly and Ordinary') turns many categories on their head—not only revolutionary and antirevolutionary, but also objective and subjective." In *Supercrit #2*, 18. Waiting for us in the next page Kester agrees: "It is indeed unanswerable that Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown were right."

41 Denise Scott Brown, "Comments on the Design of the First Edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*." in *Supercrit #2*, 18.

wiggle room over the glove where form follows function!"<sup>49</sup> then we would have something that so far, only happens in fiction. Is it not both great and ironic that a Princeton University building designed by VSBA gets transformed into a hospital by merely changing its external signs? That happens every week in the TV show *House M.D.* Sadly, we are not there yet—that is mere fiction. What did we get from Las Vegas after all? Was it not the logical after-book to *Learning from Las Vegas*, the one Steven Izenour did on the *White Tower* shops? Were we discussing civil rights or commercial strategies? Is that relevant today? What does it mean for an architect to *care*?

Scott Brown does care: "Cogent issues of definition remain: function in architecture is defined by whom, for whom, and when? Who decides what is functional or which functions to fulfill? These ultimately political questions suggest that social and community concerns and values be taken into account when building programs and functions are discussed—especially as we move from the face-to-face client to unknown 'users' represented by statistics and by institutional or agency clients."<sup>50</sup> I think this book has also answered those questions, indicating their complexity, but it has mostly thrown its readers into a skeptical take on the ordinary, in which we can do nothing but wonder. "Philosophy's all but unappeasable yearning for itself is bound to seem comic to those who have not felt it. To those who have felt it, it may next seem frightening, and they may well hate and fear it, for the step after that is to yield to the yearning, and then you are lost."<sup>51</sup>



- 42 *IAAM*, 168.
- 43 *IAAM*, 18. Page X, Acknowledgments: "I am not sure if they will like this book (nor I am sure they won't). Whatever the case, it is written in admiration and respect for both their thought and their unthought."
- 44 Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, 16.
- 45 "The quarrel about whether Derrida has arguments thus gets linked to a quarrel about whether he is a private writer—writing for the delight of us insiders who share his background, who find the same rather esoteric things as funny or beautiful or moving as he does—or rather a writer with a public mission, someone who gives us weapons with which to subvert "institutionalized knowledge" and thus social institutions. I have urged that Derrida be treated as the first sort of writer, whereas most of his American admirers have treated him as, at least in part, the second. Lumping both quarrels together, one can say that there is a quarrel between those of us who read Derrida on Plato, Hegel and Heidegger in the same way as we read Bloom or Cavell on Emerson or Freud—in order to see these authors transfigured, beaten into fascinating new shapes—and those who read Derrida to get ammunition, and strategy, for the struggle to bring about social change." Rorty, Richard, *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers Vol. 2* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 120.
- 46 *IAAM* 186, note 18: "In any case, I begin to rethink the issue of irony—and the fact that it might not even look or sound like irony anymore—in terms of the two types of humor in play in *Learning From Las Vegas: the jester and the deadpan*." In this way, Vinegar is, yet again, drawing his own conclusions despite Venturi and Scott Brown. Theirs is a different irony. In *Learning from Las Vegas*, page 161. "Irony may be the tool with which to confront and combine divergent values in architecture for a pluralist society and to accommodate the differences in values that arise between architects and client." In "Reply to Frampton": "A sense of paradox and irony will be needed on all sides to bring together social classes understand the content of Pop's messages." Her final advice in that text: "Irony may be the method that allows all these cultures and values to fit together. Ironic (not cynical) comment on the 'status quo' is the artist's gentle subversion."
- 47 See an excellent text on that. Nigel Whiteley, "LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS . . . and Los Angeles and Reyner Banham," *Visible Language* 37:3 (2003): 314–331.
- 48 According to Tom Wolfe, VSBI's entire enterprise as "Venturi's Big Wink", quoted in *IAAM*, 94.
- 49 Venturi, *Architecture as Signs and Systems*, 37.
- 50 Scott Brown, *Architecture as Signs and Systems*, 172.
- 51 Stanley Cavell, "North by Northwest", *Critical Inquiry* 7:4 (1981): 761.