

The Wager, Volume 8(16) - The Decorated Ducks: Las Vegas Architecture

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This week *The WAGER* announces the release of the fifth volume of the Harvard Medical School Division on Addictions web initiative, *Addictions & the Humanities*. The aim of this initiative is to create a public forum to discuss literature, art, music, and performing arts related to addictions, including pathological gambling. Science and technology will always help us understand addiction, but truth also may be revealed by examining art.

Below is an article from the fifth issue of *Addictions & The Humanities* that examines the architecture of the Las Vegas Strip.

In Historical studies of church-building in the middle ages, Venice, Siena, Florence, Charles Eliot Norton introduced architecture as an expression of a new a distinct European identity. He wrote that the particular art of the church building in that era, more than other forms of construction, was a “clear and brilliant illustration of the general conditions of society, and especially of its moral and intellectual dispositions” (Norton, 1908).

The architecture of Las Vegas presents its own set of challenges to the contemporary critic. Are the buildings an extension of the moral and intellectual dispositions of our culture? In the past, Christian morals shaped the construction and devotion of buildings that symbolized permanence and nationalism. Today, the role of the church and the influence of religion have given way to new social priorities, if not objects of worship. The city of Las Vegas, where seemingly anything is possible, offers a fascinating study on architecture and makes us reexamine the definition of public and commercial space and the activities contained therein.

In 1972, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour published a seminal book on architecture called *Learning from Las Vegas*. In it, the authors press architects to give more consideration to the functionality of the spaces they built, and give less attention to building “signature” or self-appeasing

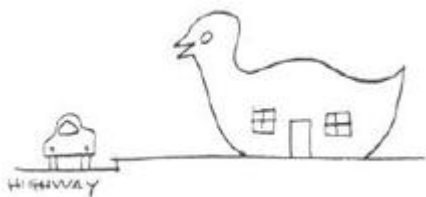
monuments. The authors analyzed the architecture of the Las Vegas Strip at length, and divided buildings into two categories: the “decorated sheds” and the “ducks”. The “decorated sheds” are basic buildings with signs applied to them (See figure 1). The second category, the “ducks,” are the buildings that stand as sculpture (See figure 2). The authors argue that there has been a shift in architecture towards the building of “ducks.” “When modern architects righteously abandoned ornament on buildings,” writes Venturi, “they unconsciously designed buildings that were ornament” (Venturi, Brown, & Izenour, 1972). The functionality of the building was replaced by the symbolism of the ornament per se. A walk down the Strip today provides numerous examples of buildings as sculptures and ornaments.

Figure 1. The Las Vegas “decorated shed” architecture



From Venturi, R., Brown, D. S., & Izenour, S. (1972). *Learning from Las Vegas* (Revised Edition ed.). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Figure 2. The Las Vegas “duck” architecture



From Venturi, R., Brown, D. S., & Izenour, S. (1972). *Learning from Las Vegas* (Revised Edition ed.). Cambridge: MIT Press.

In the analysis of the interior design of casinos, Venturi writes: “The gambling room is always very dark...enclosed...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" (Venturi et al., 1972). The deliberate separation of the occupant from temporal and spatial markers is a characteristic almost exclusively applied to gaming spaces. The gamer, thus, cognitively adheres to the activity that she is performing, and not her surroundings. Space and time are defined by the game itself, and perhaps the money spent playing it. Venturi was describing gaming rooms in the 1970s; today we see a more dynamic and mindful approach to the design of gaming spaces.

Las Vegas architecture seems to be evolving once again. The design of future projects focuses on an integration of interior and exterior space. This architectural change stems from a shift in the resorts' focus to the needs of the people that use and inhabit the buildings. Casinos are now just one of the many attractions available in the resort. Steve Wynn, who elevated the Vegas aesthetic by bringing fine arts and designer boutiques to the Strip, is now building the ultimate mega-resort. The exterior architecture of Wynn has been designed to invite people in. This is a marked departure from the dancing water shows in front of the *Bellagio*, the volcano at the *Mirage*, and the buccaneer show outside *Treasure Island* which incorporates and yet distances the passerby from the main building. If Wynn succeeds, a new era may be dawning on the Strip. Within Wynn, gaming spaces will compete with restaurants, theatrical shows, a golf course, a spa, and a number of other attractions.

The study and analysis of Las Vegas architecture and interior design offers us a glimpse of what society looks for in the spaces they chose for recreation. Whether analyzed from a social, anthropological, artistic or psychological perspective, the Strip will always fascinate us with its contrasts and ever evolving displays - be those ducks or decorated sheds.

Comments on this article can be addressed to Gabriel Caro.

References

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