

# EXPLORATIONS IN ARCHITECTURE

## TEACHING DESIGN RESEARCH

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## METHODOLOGY Historical Case Study

THE INVENTION OF THE URBAN RESEARCH STUDIO:  
ROBERT VENTURI, DENISE SCOTT BROWN, AND STEVEN  
IZENOUR'S *LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS*, 1972

Martino Stierli

When they published their seminal study on the urbanism of the car-oriented city in 1972, American architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour triggered a debate that was to shape architectural discourse for the following decade. By redefining architecture as a communication system, they thoroughly questioned the tenets of late modernism. *Learning from Las Vegas* was indeed taken as a provocation. While critics such as Tomas Maldonado and Kenneth Frampton accused the Venturi team of cynicism, cultural theorists welcomed the book as a manifesto of postmodernism, an appraisal Venturi and Scott Brown rather unsuccessfully attempted to reject. *Learning from Las Vegas* called for a renewal of architecture based on the methods first exploited by Pop Art, that is, a translation of the imagery of popular culture into a high-cultural context. Thus, the Venturi team took the commercial vernacular of the American city as a visual repository out of which a socially and aesthetically relevant contemporary architecture should evolve.

*Learning from Las Vegas*, irrespective of the heated debates it initiated, also comprised a highly innovative experiment in architectural education. The book was based on a programmatic essay that Venturi and Scott Brown had published in *Architectural Forum* in 1968 and on a research studio they tutored jointly at Yale University in the fall of the same year, with their assistant Steven Izenour. The Las Vegas studio was one in a series of three consecutive courses Venturi and Scott Brown taught at Yale, each of which was directed at investigating new methods of architectural education and learning. Both Venturi and Scott Brown had been independently involved in instruction at a number of universities, but it was at Yale that they amalgamated their ideas into a coherent approach to architectural education. In 1967, they and their students had investigated the architecture and signage in metropolitan mass-transportation systems. In 1970, the "Learning from Levittown" studio focused on the imagery of the private realms of suburban homeowners. This study was informed by a sociological understanding of the everyday suburban landscape.

All three studios and the Las Vegas one in particular were unusual both in content and methodology. As their object, the studios took the layout and appearance of the suburban, car-oriented landscape of "urban sprawl." They proceeded along the disciplinary divide between architecture and urban planning, seeking to

analyze and dissect the contemporary city while at the same time specifically addressing the consequences of the findings for architectural design. More importantly, the studios departed from the traditional design studio to make research the main focus of their investigation. A large part of the semester program was taken up by library research and a field trip to Las Vegas. The main objective of this inquiry was to arrive at a valid image of the urban form which had developed in the American West and whose significance for contemporary culture had been asserted a few years earlier by writer Tom Wolfe. To this end, the Venturi team and their students experimented with a variety of visual media. In addition to relatively conventional media such as maps and charts, photography and film took a prominent part in their research. By mounting a camera on the hood of their car and driving along the Strip (a technique borrowed from artist Ed Ruscha), the Venturi team recorded an unadulterated or in their terms "deadpan" image of the city.

The "Learning from Las Vegas" studio was the prototype for a number of subsequent attempts to accommodate urban research within architectural education, in particular in its use of new representational media to analyze the city. However, for Venturi and Scott Brown, research did not constitute an end in itself. Rather, the analytical and scholarly approach was intended to form a basis for architectural production, and Venturi and Scott Brown emphasized the fact that their studios were directed toward designers. Referring to methods developed in the humanities and empirical sociology, they introduced the notion of interdisciplinary discourse into architectural education. By presenting visual media as the object and product of research, they demonstrated the mutual applicability of science and the arts and the informative potential of this application for architectural design.

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A VENTURI, SCOTT BROWN, IZENOUR *Martino Stierli*

1,2 Imaging the city: Students of the Learning from Las Vegas research studio preparing a camera for filming on the Las Vegas Strip and on Fremont Street, 1968.

3 A "deadpan" image of Las Vegas: Sequence of stills from a film taken with a motorized camera, documenting a drive on the Las Vegas Strip, 1968.

4 "A schedule of Las Vegas Strip hotels: Plans and sections and elements": chart from the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, 1972.

1



2



3



4

	Front	Side	Back	Plan	Elevation	Roof	Parking	Exterior	Entrance	Interior	Detail	Model
Sahara												
Riviera												
Stardust												
Caesars Palace												
Dunes												
Aladdin												
Tropicana												