Essay by **James Khamsi**

Lessons *Learned*

Quandaries posed by *Learning from Las Vegas* and *Delirious New York*

Learning from Las Vegas and *Delirious New York* are two books about American cities, and they are two books about American urbanism at specific moments in time: the 1960s, the moment after the decline of Modernism, and the 1920s, the moment just before its advent.

Beyond being about places and times, they are about forms of architecture: successful forms of architecture, pleasurable forms of architecture, and popular forms of architecture.

Beyond being about places, times, and forms, these texts are about the market and the discipline of architecture. They are about the forms of architecture and cultural engagement that liberal development was able to generate and which the discipline was failing to produce. In order to evaluate the enduring or exhausted legacy of these projects, we must appraise these texts and their attitudes towards place, time, form, and the market.

Place

When Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown brought their students from Yale to Las Vegas, they found a city that had grown on a tabula rasa: the desert. It was an environment of vast spaces traversed at great speed by cars with novel forms of architectural arrangement oriented around the strip. Buildings were set back behind parking lots, creating a gulf that was too wide for traditional architectural ornamentation to communicate across, creating a problem of communication and symbolism for built form. "Space is not the most important constituent of suburban form. Communication across space is more important."[1] In this environment, a new symbolic order of highway signs emerged.

In contrast to Las Vegas, Rem Koolhaas' historical study of New York in the early twentieth century uncovered an environment of extreme density that created new architectural and cultural dynamics. "Congestion itself is the essential condition for realizing each of these metaphors [referring to the visions of Hugh Ferris and Harvey Wiley Corbett] in the reality of the Grid."[2]

Time

The Last Vegas Strip "just grew, and perhaps its initiators built it outside of city limits to escape controls."[3]

Manhattan's "grid makes the history of architecture and all previous lessons of urbanism irrelevant."[4]

Las Vegas and Manhattan are cities without histories, they are cities of technology that coalesced in and around infrastructural forms: the grid and the strip. Taken as a pair, these projects document the effects that successive waves of technological change have had on patterns of urbanism in the twentieth century.

Industrialization's evolution from steam and iron to electricity and steel gave us the elevator, the streetcar, steel frame construction, and the electrical light: "technologies of the metropolis" that radically altered the spatial practices of the urban classes.[5] Some of these technologies dispersed parts of the city, others, namely the elevator and steel frame, densified other parts through vertical growth.[6]
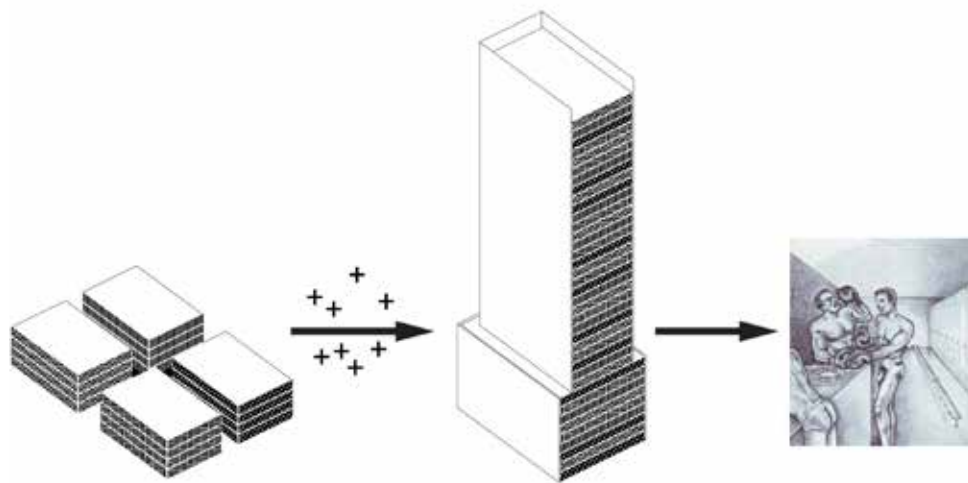
By the 1940s and 50s, as the car grew to be the most dominant form of personal mobility, the concentration of American cities and towns around infrastructural nodes was undone the distributed logic of roadways.[7] The car, in combination with technological advancements in telecommunications, industry, and business, rendered urban form more flexible and diffusible.[8] The redistribution of labor, business, and leisure resources freed contemporary urbanization to spread across regional geographies without regard for political boundaries and any pre-conceived image of the city.[9] In comparison to its rail-based antecedents, which corralled and structured individual commuting itineraries, auto-infrastructure offers seemingly limitless freedom. And in comparison to those antecedents, which were by measures dis-aggregative and centralizing, the auto-infrastructure is dominantly dispersive.[10]

American cities all experienced similar waves of change, so why then the focus on Las Vegas and New York? These sites of piqued their authors because they were extreme instantiations of normal conditions.[11] According to Venturi and Scott-Brown, Las Vegas was an "archetype rather than a prototype, an exaggerated example from which to derive lessons for the typical."[12] Though their subjects, 1920s Manhattan and 1960s Las Vegas, are both American and set apart by only forty years, they are a study in contrasts. Both describe the architecture under intense pressure conditions. Manhattan, through the advent elevator and the steel frame and the concentration they brought, was the archetype of the Metropolis, fusing a "culture of congestion." In Las Vegas, the vacuum effect of the automobile and highway created "vast expansive texture: the mega texture of the commercial landscape," making it the archetype of the American suburb.[13]

Archetypes

Technological change altered the organization of cities, beyond that, these projects are concerned with the effects they had on the nature of architecture, the novel building types they produced and the forms of subjectivity that grew as a result. Whereas modernism generated new prototypes from within (the Dom-ino, the cruciform tower); these texts found their archetypes in the world around us: the decorated shed and the skyscraper. These new forms recast relationships between interior and exterior, structure and ornament, function, and representation.

The metropolitan form at the core of Delirious New York is the skyscraper: a "proliferation of space" that resulted from the "*ad infinitum*" multiplication of a site made possible by steel frame construction and the elevator.[14] It created a new arithmetic of volume and surface: "mathematically, the interior volume of three dimensional objects increases in cubed leaps and the containing envelope only by squared increments: less and less surface has to represent more and more interior activity." Abetted by the elevator, disconnects between the envelope and contents are multiplied by "brutal disjunctions" between the integral parts of the project. Individual floors are autonomous, relieved of

responsibility towards one another, and freed to pursue their own fantasies. In the Downtown Athletic Club, the "apotheosis" of the social potential of the skyscraper, programs are stacked one on top of the other—each offering its own particular mix of function and ambiance. In the skyscraper, the pressurized plenum of the metropolis renders each tower a collage of juxtaposed experiences and subjectivities.

In the vacuum of Las Vegas, contrasting tendencies are observed as the architectural unity of function and symbolism was delaminated across the vast gulf of the parking lot. Citing the palazzi of Renaissance Italy as precedent, Venturi and Scott-Brown demonstrate the blurry line between iconography and structure in classical architecture: an element's articulation could be one, the other, or both.[15] By contrast, under conditions of speed and space, the iconographic and the functional become distinct, spatially segregated entities with diverging performance criteria. The "decoration" acquired a new scale to address the speed of drivers passing by. At the back of the site, the shed, an interior augmented by artificial illumination and mechanical cooling, was freed from any natural impediment to its horizontal expansion.[16]

Architecture in a pressure plenum: A Machine for Metropolitan Bachelors © James Khamsi
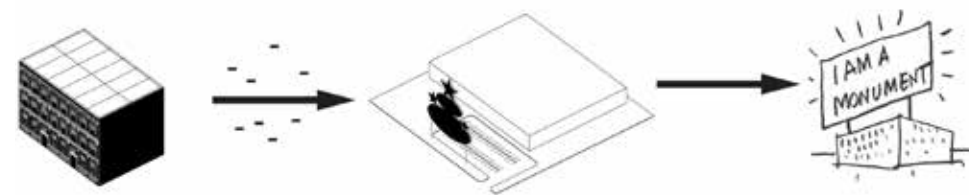
Architecture in a pressure vacuum: A recommendation for a Monument © James Khamsi

Method

These archetypes were discovered through a new engagement with reality, one that sought to avoid, or at least suspend, biases and a-priori judgments of taste. At the onset of her career, Scott-Brown was troubled by absence of a "non-judgmental, non directive attitude," which had a deep influence in visual art, psychology, and music through the twentieth century, in architecture and urban design.[17] In reaction, she and her partner introduced it as a method to a series of studios that studied "extreme forms" of the "landscape of suburban sprawl that surrounds all American cities."[18] Dissatisfied with modern urbanism's disdain for "exiting conditions," they polemically aimed to question "how we look at things," suggesting that the method may "make later judgment more sensitive."[19]

Koolhaas has cited their influence on *Delirious New York* explaining that at the time, as "it seemed increasingly uncertain what should happen, one should look at reality, and describe cities and describe developments as they were taking place; and if anything, interpret rather than speculate how the future would look." For him, *Learning From Las Vegas* in 1972 pointed to a fundamental shift in architectural discourse: "the age of manifestos seemed to be over."[20]

It is the precisely this search for novel archetypes within the real that distinguish these projects from other contemporaneous strategies urban analyses. If we consider site analysis as the documentation of a territorial milieu to reveal the forces and contingencies that will affect a project, then these projects pursue a different objective. Consider *Learning from Las Vegas* in comparison two contemporaneous site analysis methods such as Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City* and Ian McHarg's *Design with Nature*. For Lynch, the map objectively documents people's subjective understanding of their cities and the constructed elements that contribute to it.[21] For McHargh, the map elucidates the visible, non-visible, living, and geologic elements that interact to produce the ecology of a site. Lynch is interested in how a site is experienced; McHarg is interested in how a site is conditioned. They share an interest in reading and decoding a territory in anticipation of design action.

Can the same be said of *Learning from Las Vegas* and *Delirious New York*? Las Vegas and New York were not immediately sites for their authors' practices. Neither delves too deeply into the social or ecological forces that had converged produce their unique morphology. Here we can distinguish two different kinds of analytic gazes: one that is invested in place and seeks specificity, the other, exemplified by these texts, is invested in disciplinary questions and explores generalities.

Market

Their engagement with reality produced its most provocative conclusions when the authors addressed the realities of commercial development. *Learning from Las Vegas* situates the locus of innovation and provocation outside academic architectural circles and in the commercial realm. It was commercial development that was able to fill the void opened by technological change, and it was commercial architecture that was producing new formal vocabularies and new means to communicate with the public.

For Scott-Brown, working with the archetypes of commercial architecture connects designers with the needs and desires of people. "The first lesson for architects is the pluralism of need. No builder-developer in his right mind would announce: 'I am building for Man.' He is building for a market, for a group of people defined by income range, age, family composition and life style."[22] The market could simultaneously open and discipline architectural production. If the rallying cry of modernism was *"Architecture or Revolution*," for Scott-Brown and Venturi it was "*Hop on Pop*."

These projects reacted to radical technological transformations in the built environment that were too broad and occurred too quickly for academic architectural discourse to keep abreast with. We can credit these texts for introducing a form of curiosity with the real to architecture and urbanism. They injected new capabilities into the discipline: the ability to critically engage research and analysis tools; the ability to identify new architectural forms and cultural patterns in the built environment; the ability to adapt new modes of operation on the fly.

For the authors, these books carry a personal legacy that reverberates through decades of architectural production. For Venturi and Scott Brown, the analytic techniques, conclusions about publicity and enduring interest in symbolism and pop culture are hallmarks of their work.[23]

For Koolhaas, continued his "non-judgmental" investigation into real sites such Atlanta, Lagos, and the Pearl River Delta, as he framed it in 1989: "judgments make you heavy . . . I would rather talk about the postponement of judgment and articulation of the problematic, which does justice to as many good and bad sides as possible."[24] Instances of this formulation have occurred in other writing as well. Two notable examples are his admonishment to architects and urbanism to "dare to be utterly uncritical" in "Whatever Happened to Urbanism" and the "Y€$ Regime" from the turn of the millennium.

Looking at these projects from a contemporary vantage, without their polemical friction against the exhausted monolith of Modernism, new questions emerge. What is the legacy of these texts now that the supremacy of market-based private enterprise has been globally affirmed over public investment as the preferred means to urbanization and now that a host of crises (climate change, obesity, gentrification, etc.) make us skeptical of the urbanism liberalism has delivered? Should *Delirious New York*'s and *Learning from Las Vegas*'s enthusiasm (perhaps qualified enthusiasm) for commercialized laissez-faire come under scrutiny? How should we then characterize these texts within the recent history of architectural and urban discourse? These two books offer three possible ways to understand their legacy.

A beginning: one view of their legacy would see these texts as announcements of a new, post-modern urbanism. In that light, they can be read as the creation myths of its fundamental characters and configurations. Which begs the question: have all the archetypes of contemporary development been invented? Has urbanism subsequently become a game of shuffling and playing with combinations? Is innovation in urbanism now merely the exaggerations of types—taller skyscrapers, larger spontaneous desert cities, more deliriousness? These texts are the source books of the patterns of urbanism of our time.

An end: an alternate reading could suggest that the technological changes that motivated the phenomena observed in these texts have come to an end. They narrated how heavy infrastructural developments changed cities—the last of such developments is the freeway. Since then, we have not witnessed a similar archetypal transformation to urban form. Which isn't to say infrastructure and technological changes do not continue to affect our cities. Rather, technology has increasingly become immaterial, virtual, and invisible. The spatial effects newer technologies are felt at radically polarized scales—operating at either the personal or the global level. As a result of this shift in nature, certain urban/regional relationships have dissolved into broader global, planetary questions. Cities now operate as nodes in global markets and competitors in a global arena. As the nature of urban change occurs in different registers and frequencies, the discursive and analytic lessons of these projects have diminished relevancy: while they describe certain dynamics in twentieth century metropolitan and suburban form, they cannot be squared with the technological milieu of contemporary urbanism.

An inflection: a third reading of their legacy follows from the inflection of urban inquiry from speculation to realism. This reading presents a quandary: in order to advance a disciplinary critique of modern urbanism, these texts cede the critical function of urbanism—a bold polemic in the wake of the crises of the urban renewal era. They imply that, ultimately, the power to transform urbanism rests with the market. In their wake, we can observe a fundamental shift in urbanism as a discipline. Whereas we once proposed cities—Garden Cities, Broadacre Cities, Radiant Cities—today we speak of urbanisms—landscape urbanisms, infrastructural urbanisms, tactical urbanisms. Urbanism, the discipline, has been completely reoriented to monitor, document, and intervene in urbanism, the phenomenon that is constantly unfolding. No longer able to progressively lead the discourse on urbanization, design can only react incrementally to contingencies coalescing around it. Though decades have passed since their publication, fundamental questions still remain for the design disciplines. How well equipped is the contemporary discourse to question contemporary urban phenomena? Can the discourse critically challenge the development of cities, or are its sub-disciplines only able to slot into the market-defined enclaves to create situationally specific environments?

1   Denise Scott-Brown, "Learning from Pop," in *Architecture Theory Since 1968* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 63.

2   Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997), 125.

3   Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 82.

4   Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 20.

5   Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Swerve Editions, 2000), 92.

6   David W. Jones, *Mass Motorization + Mass Transit* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 45.

7   Peter Rowe, *Making a Middle Landscape* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 10.

8   Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Volume I* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 431.

9   James Khamsi and Emily Goldman, "Greater Connections," *MONU Magazine on Urbanism* 19 (Autumn 2013).

10 Robert E. Lang, *Edgeless Cities: Exploring the Elusive Metropolis* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2003), 40.

11 Denise Scott-Brown: "Analysis of the extreme forms would be easier than analysis of more typical ones, which were usually overlaid on earlier patterns. However, the intention was to throw light on the everyday. We aimed to document the characteristics of American place that were alluded to by the writers of the 1960s and also to teach ourselves, as artists, to be receptive to the mandates of our time."Denise Scott-Brown, "Invention and Tradition," *MAS Context* 13 (Spring 2012): 6-29.

12 Venturi, Scott-Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 18.

13 Venturi, Scott-Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 13.

14 Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 82.

15 Venturi, Scott-Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 107.

16 "Michael Piper and James Khamsi, "Endless Architecture," *MONU Magazine on Urbanism* 21 (Autumn 2014): 52.

17 Denise Scott-Brown, "On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning," in *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 3 (1969): 184-186.

18 Scott-Brown, "Invention and Tradition," 6-29. See also Jessica Lautin, "More than Ticky Tacky: Venturi, Scott-Brown and Learning from the Levittown Studio," in *Second Suburb: Levittown, Pennsylvania*, ed. Dianne Harris (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2010).

19 Venturi, Scott-Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 3.

20 Quotes taken from Rem Koolhaas, "Supercrit #5" (lecture, Westminster University, May 5, 2006), http://www.supercrits.com/5/.

21 James Khamsi, "Curious Little Diagrams," *Urban Infill* 5 (Fall 2012).

22 Scott-Brown, "Learning from Pop," 62.

23 Maurice Harteveld and Denise Scott Brown, "On Public Interior Space," *AA Files*, no. 56 (London: Architectural Association School of Architecture, 2007): 64-73.

24 Alejandro Zaera, "Finding Freedoms: Conversations with Rem Koolhaas," *El Croquis* 53+79 (Madrid: El Croquis Editorial, 2004), 31.