

advocate for it or, at the very least, operate within it.

Happily, the presentation of two projects in the revised edition succeeds in this regard, notably because the projects themselves stand out as exemplary practices of everyday urbanism. "WiMBY!" or Welcome to my Backyard is a project of the Crimson Architectural Historians, a Dutch research and design collective working on the redevelopment of Hoogvliet, a post-war new town near Rotterdam. For a period of six years Crimson worked with local residents and officials to organize festivals and events, design and build parks and recreation areas, create a brand image for the town, and plan for future architecture and construction. WiMBY! directly engaged the community through a game called "Logica" that allowed planning decisions to be made through citizen and designer discourse. Crimson's WiMBY! approach is straightforward but exacting, and the collective cautions that it may not be appropriate for all circumstances: first, take stock of the conditions, understand the current programs, wishes, and demands that already exist, and together aim to present architecture, art and landscape projects that present a convincing image of the new future. As presented in this volume, WiMBY! is a pragmatic and useful method for cultivating everyday urbanism through design.

"101 Urban Salvations" documents an urban planning studio Margaret Crawford conducted at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 2007. The basis of the studio was a deceptively simple proposition for improving the GSD's home town: "Cambridge would be a better place to live if..." Residents were asked to fill in the blank and the planning students winnowed the results, which ranged from the politically mundane to the architecturally visionary, into a list of 101 real and ideal ways to improve local livability. "101 Urban Salvations" highlights and articulates ways to enhance the everyday, but it also frames the discussion as a continuing dialogue with the public

via a blog. As in the WiMBY! approach, the community is given a strategic design voice.

If everyday urbanism renounces expertise and relies instead upon a democratic and inclusive process of generating, considering, critiquing and implementing urban design, how is everyday urbanism initiated? Is everything everyday urbanism? Is everyone a designer? While inclusive inquiries give everyone in the community a voice in urban design, everyday urbanists aren't simply curators of a community wish list. They are strategists who put forward critical ideas that neighborhoods can respond to, accept, reject or transform. Everyday urbanists don't just give people what they ask for or think they need, they help people think about what they haven't already considered. And that is the value of this revised edition of *Everyday Urbanism*; it helps us design the everyday world in which we live and work.

Karen Lewis

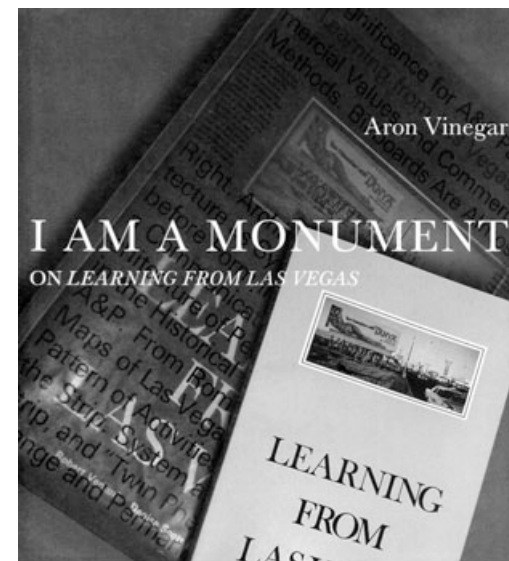
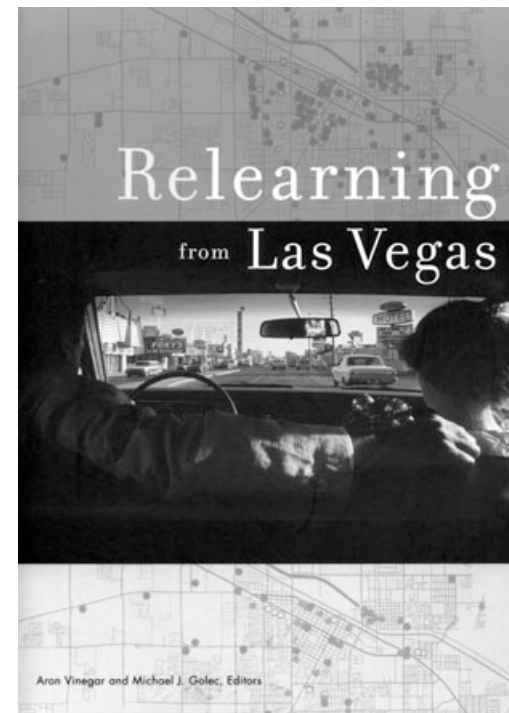
### Relearning from Las Vegas

ARON VINEGAR and MICHAEL J. GOLEC, editors  
University of Minnesota Press, 2009  
208 pages, illustrated  
\$25.00 (paper)

### I Am a Monument: On Learning from Las Vegas

ARON VINEGAR  
MIT Press, 2008  
208 pages, illustrated  
\$29.95 (cloth)

At the end of his introduction to *I Am a Monument*, Aron Vinegar addresses the issue of interpretation. He calls his book a "reading," and notes that all reading requires a degree of "reading in," or into, the object being read. This he likens to a kind of "forcing," as in, perhaps, the forcing of a bulb to bloom, and observes that "the tone and truth of that forcing" is the most critical part of the reading.



Herein lies the most interesting question raised by Vinegar's book and the companion volume of essays edited by Vinegar and Michael Golec, *Relearning from Las Vegas*. What do interpretations of architectural theory do? Post-postmodern subjects that we are, we understand that no interpretation is neutral, but how are we to evaluate these interpretations? Must the theory assessing the theory be temporally and culturally consistent? What criteria is relevant – fit, power, a convincing argument, sufficient evidence? Or are these interpretations of transformative value, to be judged by how completely they alter how we see the object and everything within its milieu?

As the titles suggest, the subject of the two volumes is *Learning from Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's seminal 1972 treatise on the urban form of postwar America at its most hyperbolic. The last major compilation on the work of Venturi Scott Brown is Christopher Mead's twenty-year-old *The Architecture of Robert Venturi* which concentrated more on *Complexity and Contradiction's* invitation to an architecture of subtle historical references than on the inconvenient truths of the contemporary built environment found in *Learning from Las Vegas*. Mead's book also failed to address Scott Brown's contributions the partnership. In contrast, the present volume, which assembles the insights of a new crop of scholars and critics, credits Scott Brown with much of the authorship of the ideas in *Learning from Las Vegas*. It also demonstrates the multiplicity of approaches that can find a foothold in Venturi Scott Brown's work.

As is often the case with messy, imprecise, and protean works of theory, *Learning from Las Vegas* has more often been criticized for what it does not do than assessed for what it does do. The present group of essays are more subtle and diverse than the critiques of the previous generation, which were grounded in architecture's supposed autonomy and utopia, both of which Venturi Scott Brown explicitly oppose. Much of this criticism refused to take the claims and propositions of

*Learning from Las Vegas* at face value, finding more, and same less, meaning than is actually there. Here, by contrast, Rita Bhatt's essay, using Nelson Goodman's theories of symbolization in architecture to assess Venturi Scott Brown's success in understanding the actions of buildings in everyday culture, and Katherine Smith's comparison of the strategies of *Learning from Las Vegas* with those of pop art, stay close to the position of the text. On the other hand, Nigel Whiteley's final essay comparing Venturi Scott Brown's work to Reyner Banham's misses the point that the axe Venturi and Scott Brown are grinding is different from Banham's. This may be because Venturi Scott Brown's position is (still) hard to take. Jean-Claude Lebensztejn addresses this in an awkward, difficult, cranky essay originally published in 1981. He argues that architects should be part of a culture rather than refusing it, and should understand and work with middle class taste rather than judging it from above or below.

Another common approach is to examine a single aspect of *Learning from Las Vegas* that intersects with the interest of the author, often to the detriment of an understanding of Venturi Scott Brown's complex argument. Both Karsten Harries and Dell Upton take Venturi Scott Brown to task for reducing architecture to text. Harries concludes that a "mixture of irony and nostalgia" characterizes our culture, within which theory has become a strange kind of ornament to architecture. Upton criticizes Venturi Scott Brown for failing to take into account that the built environment acts somatically as well as cognitively. He asserts that Venturi Scott Brown are responsible for intellectualizing architecture and claims that the book "helped deliver American architectural theory into the linguistic bondage from which it has yet to be liberated."

One of the characteristics of *Learning from Las Vegas* as a theoretical text is its close connection to the practice of architecture: it is theory by and for designers. John McMorrough's essay, which identifies three kinds of signs (marquee, graphic,

billboard) as artistic models for architectural design, asks why we should still study *Learning from Las Vegas*. His answer is unequivocal: "architecture has the ambition to embody culture, and representation has historically been one of the means by which it enacts this mission." On the other hand, Michael Golec's careful examination of the body of the book addresses the practice of the book itself. Golec claims that the first edition, a large format late Bauhaus design by Muriel Cooper of MIT Press that "mobilizes all manner of visual devices to inform its audience," is more adequate to their aim of representing Las Vegas than the second revised edition designed by Venturi and Scott Brown themselves.

Vinegar's piece, like his longer exposition in *I Am a Monument*, reads *Learning from Las Vegas* through the lens of Stanley Cavell's essays on skepticism and the ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Luc Nancy and others. Vinegar explores issues central to the skeptical dilemma: the relationship between inner and outer, appearance and "reality," expression and "inexpression," transparency and opacity of meaning. Cavell posits what he calls "acknowledgment," a stance taken by an individual in response to his/her knowledge of the world, as the resolution to these dilemmas, and Vinegar's essays could be called an acknowledgement of Venturi Scott Brown's work.

Vinegar's discussion of the book is aimed, like Golec's, at the book itself rather than its object, Las Vegas, or its lessons for practice. He emphasizes that his theoretical perspective is responsive, rather than interpretive; it is a riff on where *Learning from Las Vegas* leads us, or what it might lead us to experience. For Vinegar, skepticism, with its questions about existence of other minds and the world, is the opposite of the "voice of the ordinary," which assumes a common world so close to us that we take its reality for granted. Vinegar sees *Learning from Las Vegas* as an acknowledgment of the ordinary, noting that its

“responsiveness to the ordinary” is also “the manifestation of its critical ambitions.” Through close readings of select pictures and passages, Vinegar finds evidence that Venturi Scott Brown share his interest in the skeptical dilemma.

Vinegar’s theoretical apparatus makes for interesting insights, but also for a tilting of Venturi Scott Brown’s own project—which establishes the restoration of a balance between the power of the inside and the power of the outside—toward the subjective. Their project operates on the prelapsarian, largely unexamined proposition that there is a real in here and a real out there, and that the goal is to restore the boundary and the balance between them.

In contrast to Vinegar’s subtle skepticism, Venturi Scott Brown’s position is less subjective and in some ways much simpler, akin to Ed Ruscha’s “Huh,” quoted by Vinegar — a stance at once engaged and open-minded, not dissimilar to Kant’s disinterested interest, but applied to an object Kant would not have considered aesthetic. Venturi Scott Brown do not claim this to be the quotidian experience of the built environment, or even of the subset called architecture, but propose it as a replacement for avant-garde shock, camp archness, cynical blasé, Heideggerian equanimity, connoisseur’s possession, and scholarly knowing — a kind of wondering, a bemused interest that is open to the new.

They attempt in their architecture to reproduce the same “Huh” that they experience in the presence of what Scott Brown has called the “agonized beauty” of the ordinary environment. There is therefore a three-level argument taking place in *Learning from Las Vegas*. One is about the nature of the enculturated member and the culture in which s/he is located. The second is about the stance of the architect toward that member and that culture. And the third is about the role of architecture within that culture. The first is used to justify the second and the third, as well as contemplated for its own sake. For Venturi Scott

Brown the “division between appearance and reality” is neither cause for desperation, nor for transcendence. It is a cause for design; the result is a façade.

Perhaps the final criterion for evaluation and interpretation of theory is the quality of the questions it raises. These books by Vinegar and Golec have elevated the questions asked about *Learning from Las Vegas* to new levels of sophistication and critical inquiry. We might quibble with the answers the books provide, but only because of the pertinence and interest of the questions themselves.

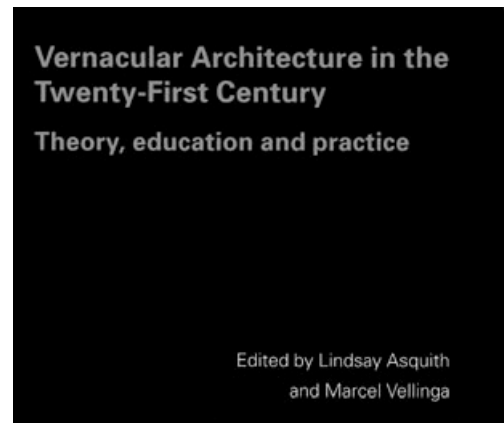
Deborah Fausch

### **Vernacular Architecture in the Twenty-First Century: Theory, Education and Practice**

LINDSAY ASQUITH and MARCEL VELLINGA, editors  
Taylor & Francis, 2006  
294 pages, illustrated  
\$31.99 (paper)

According to the editors of *Vernacular Architecture in the Twenty-First Century*, vernacular architecture occupies a marginal place in research, practice, and architectural education. To address this imbalance, the contributors to this book adopt what Nezar AlSayyad calls an “activist-oriented” approach. Their goal is to persuade readers that vernacular architecture is important, and that the lessons traditional buildings can teach are applicable to the twenty-first century built environment. In particular, the essays in this volume maintain that vernacular traditions have much to contribute to contemporary practice by offering economically and culturally sustainable solutions to global housing problems.

The book began as a tribute to Paul Oliver, known for his *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (1997) and for other writings on global vernacular building spanning four



decades. Indeed, Oliver’s influence permeates many of the essays, as several of the contributors worked or studied with him. Contributors to this collection include some of the main voices in the field, such as Amos Rapoport, Simon Bronner, and Howard Davis. The essays represent multiple disciplinary perspectives, ranging from architecture and folklore to anthropology, disaster management, and urban development, mirroring the interdisciplinarity of vernacular architecture scholarship today. While the book is organized into three broad sections, focusing on the vernacular as process, learning from the vernacular, and understanding the vernacular, the essays often overlap and speak to more than one of these themes.

Editors Lindsay Asquith and Marcel Vellinga maintain at the outset that vernacular architecture