

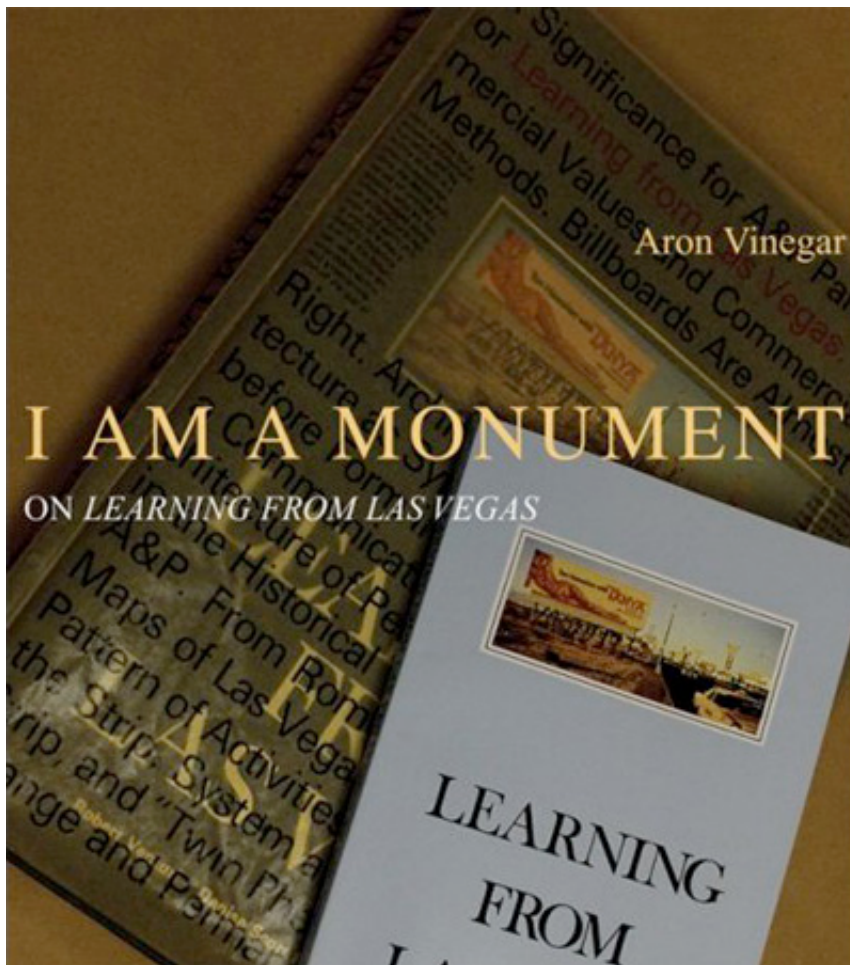
[Back to articles](#)

Links:

Of Ducks and Sheds

Below is June, 2009's Crit, as published in [Architect Magazine](#)
A book review of Aron Vinegar's *I AM A MONUMENT*

- :: [My weekly page](#)
- :: [My daily page](#)
- :: [The Archi-Tourist](#)



Article Links:

- :: [MIT Press](#)
- :: [VSBA](#)
- :: [Amazon.com](#)

I AM A MONUMENT: On Learning from Las Vegas
Aron Vinegar
MIT Press, 2008

ROBERT VENTURI, DENISE SCOTT BROWN, and Steven Izenour's classic, *Learning From Las Vegas*, famously pitted the Decorated Shed—the conventional structure with applied symbols—against the Duck—the building that is

itself a symbol. In the years following the book's 1972 publication, the Decorated Sheds vanquished the Ducks, as Postmodernism displaced heroic Modernism as the prevailing architectural style and pedagogy. Uniform glass boxes gave way to pop whimsy rendered in plaster. Form-based meaning was supplanted by sign- and symbol-based meaning—only to lose favor in the booming '90s and the early 21st century in an orgy of complex formalism on an unprecedented scale, notably evident in the development of Las Vegas itself.

Ohio State art historian Aron Vinegar wants to remedy the belief—entrenched in the minds of architects and academics—that a dichotomy exists between Ducks and Decorated Sheds. The title of his new scholarly analysis of *Learning From Las Vegas* comes from one of that book's best-known illustrations, “Recommendation for a monument.” In it, a billboard atop an anonymous, boxy building loudly proclaims, I AM A MONUMENT.

This image would seem to reinforce the traditional either/or interpretation of *Learning From Las Vegas*, but Vinegar paints a picture that is more complex, dealing with ethics as well as visual communication. Via a thorough, philosophical reading of the 1972 original and the 1977 revised editions, *I Am a Monument* aims to restore the book from its lonely place as a historical marker of the shift between Modernism and Postmodernism to the center of current debate.

So how could a book arising from an architecture studio at Yale in 1968, about a specific place, at a specific time, be more than a historical record? Or more than a dusty polemic against the Modernist architecture prevalent at the time? Vinegar's arguments for the book's relevance today start with his rereading of *Learning From Las Vegas* as words and images on a page, removed from historical context. This approach largely overrides both Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's authorial intent and subsequent critical responses to the book.

Vinegar's analysis is filtered through the lens of 20th century philosophers—primarily Stanley Cavell, whose writings explore the ordinary, its expression through language, and its interpretation. Vinegar seems to have a deep understanding of *Learning From Las Vegas*, but his use of Cavell's peculiar terminology makes it difficult to grasp. For example, Cavell's interpretation of “skepticism” expands the word's common meaning, doubt of the unknown, to include being unaware of what we already know, a near inversion of the term.

What is clear is that Vinegar sees the Duck and the Shed not as oppositional and exclusionary concepts, but as intertwined ones. This extends to what he postulates as Learning From Las Vegas' primary themes: the dialogue between skepticism and the ordinary—the common life and language we share—and their mutual dependence on expression. As Vinegar writes, “together the Duck and the Decorated Shed are entwined as a figure of attempting to overcome [others'] skepticism.”

Overcoming skepticism and acknowledging others—as Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour did in analyzing the populist Sin City—leads to investigation and a desire to learn, as opposed to an outright dismissal of others' views. This idea stands out from the rest of Vinegar's analysis as the position most relevant to our contemporary situation. An acknowledgment of others, and a willingness to learn from them, would ideally lead to more ethical and responsible buildings, counter to today's predilection for outsize Ducks. *Learning From Dubai* might be a suitable extension of the original to today's condition, an analysis of another place of excess, shaped by many architects and occurring at a time of environmental crisis. The Strip gives way to Sheikh Zayed Road.

But are Vinegar's new avenues into *Learning From Las Vegas* successful enough to override the traditional interpretations of the book—namely, the acknowledgement of architecture's role in communication systems and the appreciation of vernacular environments? While Vinegar arms the architect with a new vocabulary and new ideas, they do not hold as firmly as the judgments already rooted in architects' minds—ones that, it should be noted, are fairly accurate readings of Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's book. The authors' intentions Vinegar chooses to ignore may be too hard to shake from people's understanding of *Learning From Las Vegas*.

Vinegar's ideas add a layer to *Learning From Las Vegas*' long-held meanings, but do not displace them. Yet I Am a Monument is an admirable, deep analysis that points the way for other potential “books on books on architecture.” Who will illuminate such classics as Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York*, Bernard Tschumi's *The Manhattan Transcripts*, or Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City*?

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