

MONIKA STEIGER /

LEARNING FROM



LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS /

2015

LEARNING FROM

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LAS VEGAS

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INTRODUCTION

P a R T I

From a little railroad town, founded in 1905, to a rapid rise through the legalisation of gambling in the state of Nevada in the 1930s, Las Vegas has sparked fascination. The city has an image that clearly stands out from other towns and was marked as a preferred place where the dream of winning easy money is predominant. There, things were allowed that elsewhere were forbidden, tabu or frowned upon. The city was and is continuously filled with entertainment, day and night, which lets the time pass without one even noticing.

The present study establishes a comparison of two phases of Las Vegas' history concerning the signs in relation to the architecture. My research will span a period of 40 years, from the first publication of the book *Learning from Las Vegas*¹ by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown written in 1972 until the present. I will show how Venturi made us look differently at the relationship between architecture and signs and I am going to investigate the potential answers for following research questions:

DUE TO NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NEW TYPOLOGIES OF CITIES, ECONOMICAL OR POLITICAL ISSUES, HOW DID THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ARCHITECTURE AND THE SIGN AT LAS VEGAS' COMMERCIAL STRIP EVOLVE FROM THE TIME WHEN THE BOOK LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS CAME OUT COMPARED TO TODAY? WHAT DID WE TRULY LEARN FROM LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS?

I am going to obtain my goal with the help of said book and a personal analysis of the today's situation to understand the two periods and the associated evolution of the gambling town. The book *Learning from Las Vegas* was the result of a research studio that Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown lead at Yale University with an included field trip to the city in the desert. Beside the Las Vegas studio, they taught a series of other courses at Yale. The two architects, their assistant Steven Izenour and the students were interested in the main street, called the Strip, on which 20 years before they were there, a large number of hotels, casinos and other entertainment businesses settled down. The post-war growth of the population, the progressive auto mobilisation and the increase of material prosperity in the society had influence on the transformation of the common urban form. *Learning from Las Vegas*' goal was to see and analyse the relevant role of the automobile city in which the Strip showed a progressive change to a decentralization and suburbanization of American cities. Las Vegas was, so to speak, the model of the future city with a novel urban form. Beside the research about the shape of the city, the way of teaching architecture received a significant role in the studio. Venturi and Scott Brown tried new innovative methods out during the Las Vegas project. The focus lied on connecting the scientific research and the architectural concept. The students used various forms of visual media like photography, film, maps and diagrams as a tool to analyse the city and as a foundation for architectural creation (*Fig. 1*).

¹ Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas – The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993.

In the late 1960s, Venturi and the students were *Learning from Las Vegas*. From the today's point of view the question is, can we still learn from Las Vegas? Since an area of the Strip has been redone with a totally new concept, it is not clear yet whether a new era in Las Vegas' history has arrived or if the development will stagnate. In any case, this potential period that might arrive is not ready to be included in this study, but it is a good time to make a comparison between the two previous.

This subject is quite personal to me, because as a future exhibition designer, I have to deal with spatial and graphical questions and I enjoy finding new ways to discover more about the significant relationship between text and space. Unfortunately I was not as lucky as the students from Yale University, therefore I did not have the opportunity to visit Las Vegas before writing my memoir. Since the city is a particular example, it has an immense presence in the internet, in medias and in books, wherein it is probably one of the most pictured towns in the world. Furthermore, the transmission of its own image is almost more prominent than the real city itself. To research about Las Vegas was as it were to study its representation in the medias.



FIG. 1 / MOUNTING A CAMERA

Martino Stierli and Hilar Stadler, Las Vegas Studio – Bilder aus dem Archiv von Robert Venturi und Denise Scott Brown, Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess AG, 2008, p. 91.

L A S
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A S

LAS VEGAS WENT THROUGH A CHANGE FROM THE TIME WHEN LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS HAD BEEN PUBLISHED TO TODAY. MANY ESTABLISHMENTS FROM THE LATE 1960S DO NOT EXIST ANYMORE (FIG. 2/3). THE LOW HELD BUILDINGS WITH THE BIG NEON SIGNS² IN FRONT OF THEM GOT DEMOLISHED TO MAKE SPACE FOR A NEW COMMUNICATION SYSTEM. THE CITY EXPERIENCED AN EVOLUTION FROM DECORATED SHEDS³ TO BUILDINGS AS SIGNS. WE WILL EXAMINE THE CIRCUMSTANCES IN THE BOOK LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS WITH VENTURI'S IDEOLOGICAL AND ESTHETIC POSITION AND THE TODAY'S SITUATION⁴.

² The neon sign has two very important qualities: brightness and movement. In the late 1960s the handcrafted signs were mainly made out of neon. This light glows, but also flickers, which gives it a special character. Caused by technical aspects, neon tubes never have large diameters. The gas inside the tube needs a limited space to release the luminescence. The neon was able to be the line and the dash, which limited the form. The sometimes three dimensional, in other cases just two dimensional signs used different words, images and even sculptures to attract people.

³ For Venturi and Scott Brown a decorated shed is a building that is set back from the highway and is equipped with a big sign mounted on the façade used as an explicit symbol. The space and the structure are in the service of program, and ornaments are just to find independently of them. The juxtaposition of contrasting symbols is what constitutes the definition of it. The decorated shed is so to speak the replacement of the wrong façades from the midwestern architecture. To emphasize the importance of the store and the uniformity of the streets, the front façades were taller than the interior.

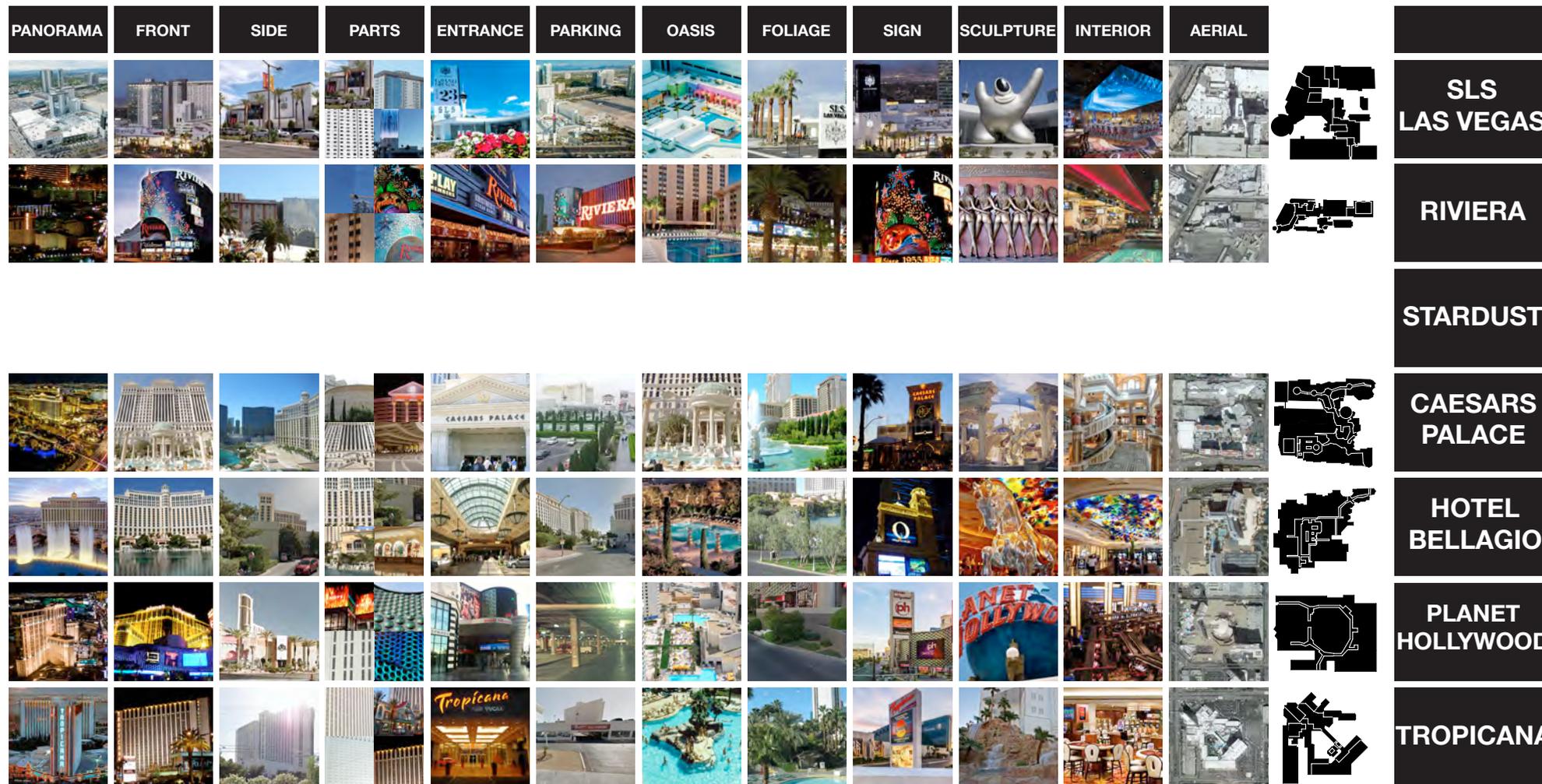
⁴ In 2001, 29 years after the study of Venturi's students, another group from the University of Nevada led by the two professors Jose L. Gamez and Jeffrey S. Hartnett updated their maps. A while later Rem Koolhaas did the same thing with a group of Harvard students. Rem Koolhaas said in his study about Las Vegas that the sign is extinguished by the architecture.

FIG. 2

FIG. 3



FIG. 2 / A SCHEDULE OF LAS VEGAS STRIP HOTELS - 1968
 ROBERT VENTURI AND DENISE SCOTT BROWN,
 LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS - THE FORGOTTEN
 SYMBOLISM OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM, CAM-
 BRIDGE: THE MIT PRESS, 1993, P. 42-44.



SLS LAS VEGAS HOTEL-CASINO IS THE FORMER SAHARA HOTEL, HOTEL BELLAGIO THE FORMER THE DUNES AND HOTEL PLANET HOLLYWOOD RESORT THE FORMER ALADDIN HOTEL. THE STARDUST HOTEL FROM 1958 HAS BEEN DEMOLISHED IN 2007. DUE TO A CHANGE OF OWNERSHIP THE CONSTRUCTION WORKS HAVE BEEN DELAYED.

FIG. 3 / A SCHEDULE OF LAS VEGAS STRIP

HOTELS - 2014

DIAGRAM MADE BY MONIKA STEIGER

FIG. 4 / CAESARS PALACE – 1968

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas – The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993, p. 54.



Presently, the Strip of Las Vegas is defined as a scenographic stage where the architecture is dominated by themes. The names of the entertainments are included in the structure of the architecture that has turned into the sign itself. According to Bruce Bégout the city in Nevada is a combination of commercial seduction and childish phantasies⁵. The goal of the architecture is to immerse the visitor into a fantasy world and this is achieved by built images that imitate historical-, mythological- or geographical-based stories or places. The period of the themed architecture can be divided into two phases. The first phase, which began with the construction of Caesars Palace in 1966 (Fig. 4), was about an influence from a specific theme often connected to tropic-ness, to the beach or the desert. The second period in the 1990s imitated existing cities like Paris, New York or Venice. Lately, style elements of the French theme of Paris Las Vegas have been removed and it seems that the second phase is already on its way to change.

⁵ Bruce Bégout, *Zeropolis – Las Vegas als Sinnbild des Amerikanischen Traums*, translated by Stefan Linster, München: Verlagsbuchhandlung Liebeskind, 2003.

Why did Las Vegas develop from a city of iconography to a city of scenography? After the legalisation of gambling in 1977 in the state New Jersey, Atlantic City turned into a competitor and Las Vegas' owners did not any longer have the exclusive rights for gambling. Increasingly the visitors were families, which might have been the beginning of the new era where the Strip became defined by themed hotel-casinos. We are going to see later that there were as well, other reasons for the shift. Nowadays, the sign is not the way Las Vegas attracts people. It is presently the immense buildings with their appearances that try to win the customers, thus the built space becomes an attraction itself. The passersby are being conveyed by messages that transmit hundreds of connotations packed inside big symbolic buildings. During the night, they are illuminated by thick structures of light fixtures, neon signs and snakes, as well as screens. Today new technologies change the appearance of the signs so that the envelope of the building or parts of it are often made of self-luminous video-walls. These media façades are being displayed during the night as well as during the day. Through them the appearance of the building can be changed from one second to the next.

Usually, signs from the old days find after their dismantling a new place in the so-called neon boneyard (Fig. 5). There the signs have the possibility to rest after the end of their lifetime. They are not hanging in front of a façade or standing beside the highway anymore, hence there is a bit of loneliness perceptible. In this special space, the signs are not being used in relation to the architecture, because they are retired while their job has been overtaken by a new generation. Silently the signs stand there, not screaming any longer at the people to play inside the casinos. In the neon boneyard they have the opportunity to show for the last time their real beauty without any rust supported by Las Vegas' dry climate. They preserved their elegance, only the light bulbs which break through the heat of the sun, give an indication that the signs are not the youngest anymore.

WITH THE SHIFT TOWARDS THEMED ARCHITECTURE, THE SIGN SYSTEM OF LAS VEGAS CHANGED AND SIGNS ARE NO LONGER USED IN THEIR OLD ROLE. WHAT WE SEE NOW, DOES IT HAVE THE SAME CHARISMA AS THE SIGNS WE FIND IN THE NEON BONEYARD? WHEN YOU LOOK AT IMAGES FROM THE STRIP IN THE LATE 1960S, VENTURI'S FASCINATION FOR THE SIGN IS UTTERLY COMPREHENSIVE.

”

FIG. 5 / VENTURI VISITING THE NEON BONEYARD

Martino Stierli and Hilar Stadler, *Las Vegas Studio – Bilder aus dem Archiv von Robert Venturi und Denise Scott Brown*, Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess AG, 2008, p. 41.



Venturi's background was different from Scott Brown's. He set himself apart from popular Modernism and Scott Brown who grew up in Africa supported the New Brutalism in England. Nevertheless, they were on the same path to their future architecture and theory. With the publication of *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972 the two architects caused controversial reactions amongst architects. The critics took it as a provocation whereas the other side saw it more likely as a manifesto of Postmodernism. The book that was later seen as a paradigm for Postmodernism had brought into life a totally new way of thinking and called into question the principles of late Modernism, which was the reason for the vivid response. Venturi imputed the architects of the Modernism to focus on the space and ignore the tradition of iconography. He accused them of neglecting the dimension of the symbolism in architecture and concentrating only on the form and space. Venturi and Scott Brown on the contrary were looking at the architecture as a communication system. "This architecture of styles and signs is anti spatial; it is an architecture of communication over space; communication dominates space as an element in the architecture and in the landscape."⁶ formulated Venturi and Scott Brown in the book.

With this quote we understand that what they found in the city in the desert was the replacement of spatial and architectural aspects through signs and symbols as mediums for architectural communication.

JOHN BRINCKERHOFF JACKSON, A HUMAN GEOGRAPHER THAT INFLUENCED VENTURI AND SCOTT BROWN, SAID THAT THE PUBLIC LIFE OF THE AMERICANS WAS CHANGING DURING THE PERIOD WHEN THE BOOK WAS PUBLISHED FROM THE CENTRAL PLACE IN FRONT OF THE COURT TO THE HIGHWAYS⁷.



6 Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas – The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, op.cit., p. 8.

7 As revealed by Martino Stierli, *Las Vegas im Rückblick – Die Stadt in Theorie, Fotografie und Film*, Zürich: gta Verlag ETH Zürich, 2010.

With *Learning from Las Vegas* the two architects entered into the discussion about the change of the American towns through the auto mobilisation. The car oriented environment of large distances and high speed was the reason for the disappearance of pure architectural space and the explanation for the new way of defining the program of a building via signs.

By using the methods of Pop Art⁸, Venturi and Scott Brown took the commerce of the American city as a source to develop contemporary architecture, in which existing research methods were a help to analyse the commercial buildings. It was significant for them to borrow techniques and images from the consumer society and carry them out into architectural creation including the message they intended to transmit. Their aim was to leave the aesthetics they already knew, to open up their perspectives and to make the research about Las Vegas.

Although Venturi and Scott Brown sympathised partly with the ideas of Postmodernism, they kept themselves at a distance from a certain architectural movement. "Perhaps Postmodernism emerged from this. But it did not come from us."⁹ said Denise Scott Brown about the research studio where social sciences, iconography and pop-culture met each other.

8 Pop Art transfers an existing object or the pictorial representation of it through selection and re-contextualization into a new context. It is a process of appropriation and transformation of popular contents.

9 Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Architecture as Signs and Systems – For a Mannerist Time*, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 119.

Denise Scott Brown already got before the book *Learning from Las Vegas* involved in communication and the role of signs in the public space. In the essay *The Meaningful City*¹⁰, she describes the city as a system of messages and questions the connection between the urban perceptual image and the mental image of the city in the head of the users. Furthermore, she quoted in her essay *The Image of the City*¹¹ by Kevin Lynch. We can see between the two a direct link, since Lynch was interested primary in the city as a visual phenomenon, where the focus lies on the mental image being perceived by its citizen. The American urban planner and author appears as well in *Learning from Las Vegas*. In the beginning of the book where Venturi and Scott Brown write about the experience people have when they drive, they cite the book *The View From the Road*¹² by Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch and John R. Myer. In the middle of the 1960s, the three authors show the strict point of view from inside the car. They wanted to change the view from the road, which was often described as chaotic, boring and disoriented, towards the potential beauty of driving inside a car as a rewarding moment as Valéry Didelon in the book *La Controverse Learning from Las Vegas*¹³ writes. We see that already eight years before the Yale studio a similar direction has been taken by others.

Additionally, Tom Wolfe had with the book *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*¹⁴ an influence on the two architects. He was one of the first who was interested in the city in the desert and underlined the importance of the American pop culture. Wolfe remarked that the commercial makers of the neon signs are ten years ahead compared to serious artists or architects of that time.

10 Denise Scott Brown, *The Meaningful City*, in: *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, January 1965, p. 27-32.

11 Kevin Lynch, *L'image de la cité*, Paris: Dunod, 1999.

12 Donald Appleyard and Kevin Lynch, *The View from the Road*, Cambridge: MIT press, 1964.

13 Valéry Didelon, *La Controverse Learning from Las Vegas*, Wavre: Editions Mardaga, 2011.

14 Tom Wolfe, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, New York: Bantam Books, 1977.



Bernard Rudofsky with his book *Architecture without Architects*¹⁵ had similar interests in the existing architecture and the city as Venturi and Scott Brown had. The three wanted to expand to vernacular respectively popular constructions. Rudofsky criticised architectural history, which was as stated by him, just interested in noble European buildings.

THE VIEW OF THE CITY, ACCORDING TO VENTURI AND SCOTT BROWN, IS BASED ON PEOPLE IN MOTION CREATED BY THE CAR.

Therefore, they were looking for new techniques to show a mobilised view of a moving character, where beside photography, film was a good way for them to analyse the city. A significant person influencing the photographic material that was published in the book was the artist Ed Ruscha. To inspire the students, they visited the artist's studio before the trip to Las Vegas. The American documented Southern California's everyday realities with photography in which the quests were not artistic, more likely he was searching for the realistic illustration of a situation. Motives, like the bird view of empty parking lots, had been directly taken by the Yale students and they employed a 7.6 meters long fanfold showing both street sides of Las Vegas as well (*Fig. 6/7*). Ed Ruscha made some years prior to them, a similar collage of Los Angeles' Sunset Strip.

With the diagrams and photos they intended to support their theory. I think it helps to have them printed in the book beside the text to make the relationship between the architecture and the sign clearly visible.

15 Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects – A short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico press, 1964.



FIG. 6/7



FIG. 6 / IMITATED « EDWARD RUSCHA
» ELEVATION OF THE STRIP – 1968
ROBERT VENTURI AND DENISE SCOTT BROWN,
*LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS – THE FORGOTTEN
SYMBOLISM OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM,*
CAMBRIDGE: THE MIT PRESS, 1993, P. 32 - 33.



FIG. 7 / IMITATED « EDWARD RUSCHA
» ELEVATION OF THE STRIP – 2014
DIAGRAM MADE BY MONIKA STEIGER

40 years ago, looking at the backside of the buildings, it was hard to make a distinction between their function. Back then, all the façades were plain and all of them were similar to each other. The emphasis of the front façade with the signs and the orientation towards the highway was caused by the subordination of the architecture towards the commercial interest. The relationship of the architecture and the sign were clearly dominated by the sign, which was during the night even more amplified (Fig. 8). Only the neon signs, which were illuminated and blinking, were visible. It was them, which defined the space and not the architecture. In an analogy Venturi and Scott Brown said: "If you take the signs away, there is no place."¹⁶ Caused by the focus and the investment on signs and not on buildings, which were made as simple shoeboxes, the entire façade got almost lost behind the immense neons in front.

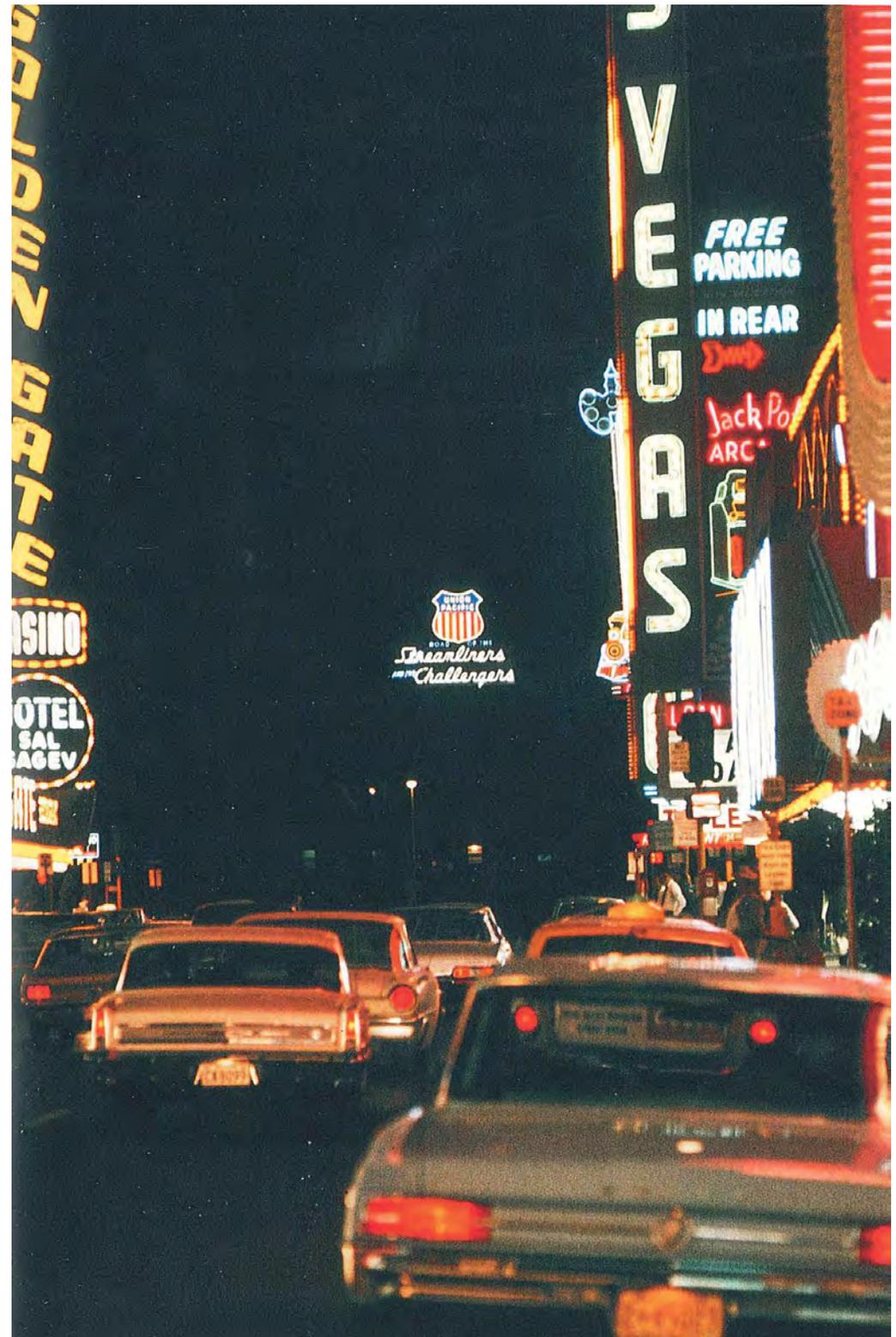
To be surrounded during the night at the Strip by different typographies and figurative lightings must have been fascinating. This street spread an exotic image that people could not find in other cities. At that time, the visitor was the reader; nowadays, text has almost disappeared and the concentration lies on built images (Fig. 9/10). The relationship went through an immense change between the analysis of Venturi and the situation of today.

The first themed hotel-casino was already established at the point in time of the Yale studio and the second followed while they were in Las Vegas. Was it a coincidence that they were there in the beginning of a significant shift in Las Vegas' history? How did they cover the issue about themed architecture?

Venturi brings up the subject of Caesars Palace in chapter "Las Vegas Styles" with several photographs and a description of the elements that visitors can see there. But he does not speak about the difference between this new type of hotel-casino and the shoebox-like buildings, which were to be found since the beginning. It is neither specifically remarked that the future of transmitting information through architecture could run in this direction.

FIG. 8 / STRIP BY NIGHT – 1968

Martino Stierli and Hilar Stadler, Las Vegas Studio – Bilder aus dem Archiv von Robert Venturi und Denise Scott Brown, Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess AG, 2008, p. 105.



¹⁶ Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas – The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, op.cit., p. 18.

Today, the relationship between the sign and the architecture is characterised by signs that gave up their role to buildings and on special effects like erupting volcanoes, roller coasters or animated tigers that help to transmit the theme. From today's perspective the Strip takes obvious symbolism to convey messages. I regard the way they try to win customers as unencrypted and exceedingly direct. Contemporary Las Vegas is a collection of images of known touristic places from all over the world, thus people are not required to know special codes to understand the city. Compared to the past I think the strip nowadays still has a major character and stands out from other cities, but the replacement of the signs through tall buildings, huge fountains and reproductions of other famous cities can just be seen as a directer, louder and faster way as the signs were before.

*THE QUESTION IS, DOES THE REPRODUCTION OF VENICE
TELL MORE THAN A SIGN WITH THE NAME?*

In my opinion the two ways of communication react on the current situation of the Strip. The signs were an appropriate way to communicate for people inside the car with a certain speed respectively the themed architecture reacts on pedestrianised streets and on people who are strolling around the city. To conclude this chapter, there is no space for nuances, subtleties or grey areas, Las Vegas is and always was attraction pure.

FIG. 9/10

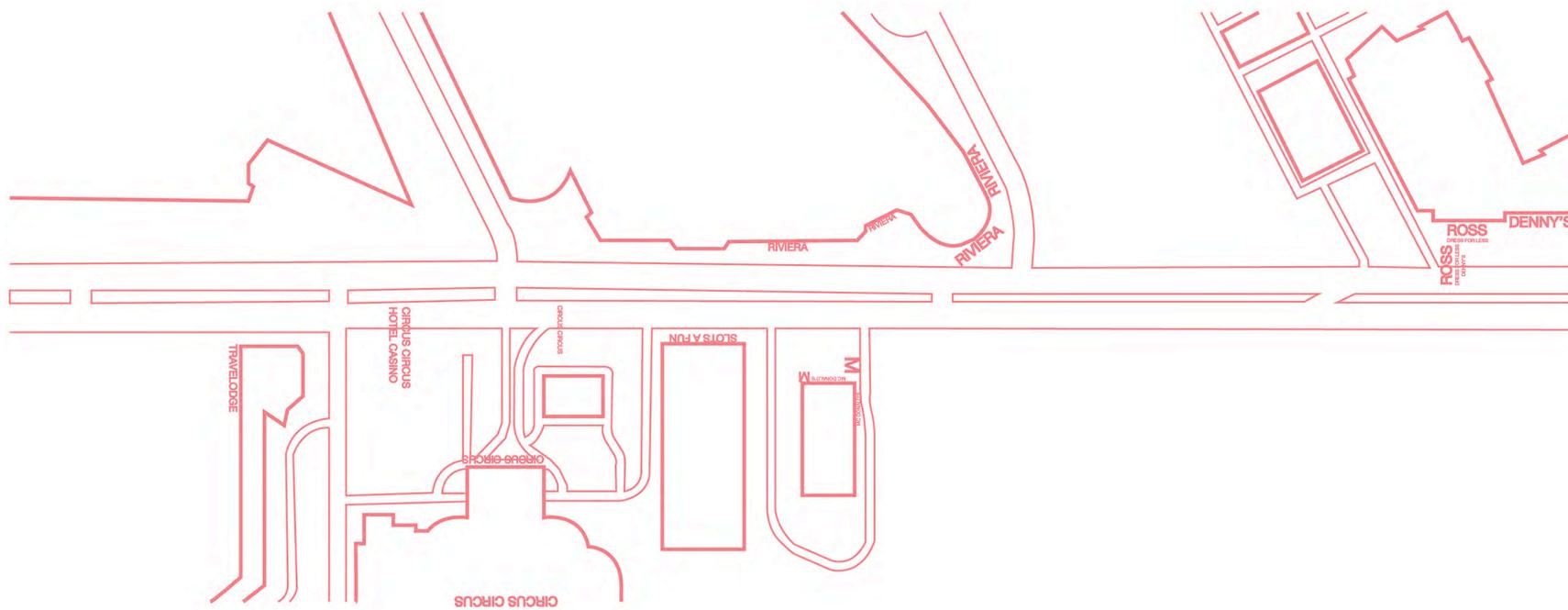


FIG. 9 / MAP OF LAS VEGAS STRIP SHOWING EVERY WRITTEN WORD SEEN FROM THE ROAD - 2014
DIAGRAM MADE BY MONIKA STEIGER

A SPECIAL THANKS GOES TO

*my personal tuteur VIVIEN PHILIZOT for his exceptional support,
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& T H E
between ARCHITECTURE & *the* SIGN

N O W

IN A LECTURE ABOUT THE SHIFT IN THE RELATIONSHIP OF ARCHITECTURE AND SIGNS, VENTURI SAID: “THE THEN WAS ABOUT SIGNS IN SPRAWL, AS THE CITY EVOLVED. THE NOW IS ABOUT SCENOGRAPHY ON STAGE – A “REAL” AND “SCENOGRAPHIC” PLACE.”¹⁷ THERE ARE SEVERAL IMPORTANT POINTS TO INCLUDE IN THE INVESTIGATION ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE TWO. WE ARE GOING TO COMPARE THE TWO PHASES OF LAS VEGAS’ SIGNS-ARCHITECTURE HISTORY IN REGARD TO THREE POINTS WHERE THE CHANGE APPEARS DISTINCTLY. THE ASPECTS TALK ABOUT: CAR VERSUS PEDESTRIANS, THE SEMANTIC APPROACH AND LAS VEGAS AS A TIME BROWSER.

¹⁷ Kester Rattenbury and Samantha Hardingham, *Supercrit 2 – Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown – Learning from Las Vegas*, Oxon: Routledge, 2007, p. 67.



During the late 1960s, the city was designed totally oriented to the car. Nowadays, very few are driving from one casino to the other. Fremont Street, which is situated at the end of the Strip, was defined as the slower-paced street before it turned into a pedestrian zone. On some parts of the street a roof was built, not to protect against the weather, but more as a connection of two street sides including a huge 450m long screen. The so-called Fremont Street Experience opened in the middle of the 1990s, during the second phase of the themed architecture. The Strip made for fast-paced traffic is now almost completely unmanageable for cars. Through the themed architecture, the sidewalk became increasingly more important until it developed into a pedestrianised boulevard. The architecture and the signs are not built to organize the traffic, but to lead people who are walking. Visitors circulate between the buildings that serve as a stage and through mini theme parks until their arrival in the main area of the casino.

**FIG. 11 / SPHINX
IN LUXOR HOTEL & CASINO**
*Quentin Bajac, Dreamlands – Des parcs
d'attractions aux cites du future, Paris: Editions
du Centre Pompidou, 2010, p. 147.*

FIG. 12 / VEGAS VICKIE SIGN
ON FREMONT STREET

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/vegasvicky/>



The court of the customers frequently begins on the sidewalk, while their journey from the streets to the inside of the casinos happens sometimes without them even noticing. As the visitors are admiring different parts of the themed outdoor areas, for example the sphinx in ancient Egypt (Fig. 11), which is situated close to the pedestrian street, they are quietly lead along until suddenly they find themselves inside a casino.

40 years ago it was not possible to stroll around aimlessly in different directions. When Venturi and Scott Brown did the research with their students, Las Vegas was the purest form of an auto city. From one entertainment venue to the next, people drove. The more spectacular the signs in front of the decorated shed were, the higher was the amount of customer traffic inside the casinos (Fig. 12). Venturi's research group was looking at the signs trying to find out how people in cars were going to react to their communication depending on the size, shape and location of them. All of the neon signs had the same aim; through leaning towards the people in the car, they were able to catch their eye. They were cleverly turned to the street in an angle that the passer-by could see. As statues in the roman epoch, which had shorter legs in order to emphasize the torso and head, the signs were sometimes made with a perspective distortion.

On the highway, the signs were partly visible from far away and had still yet another component to see while passing (Fig. 13). Made to communicate within different phases of the ride, the heraldry was placed in the upper section, while the information was in the lower.



FIG. 13 / SEQUENCES OF THE STARDUST SIGN
- 1968

Martino Stierli and Hilar Stadler, *Las Vegas Studio – Bilder aus dem Archiv von Robert Venturi und Denise Scott Brown*, Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess AG, 2008, p. 50 – 51.

On maps from that time, we can see that the city was defined through the linearity of the urban form caused by the auto mobilisation (*Fig. 14*). I imagine the situation of driving on the highway in the late 1960s as the following: people were sitting in their car and they were going with the flow of the cars in front of them. All around them an immense amount of signs, the one that was screaming loudest, would win them as customers. Could we not conceive the Strip as a rail, where the cars were fixed and concentrated along this stretched line from the north to the south and in the opposite direction?

In comparison to the late 1960s, the shape of today's Las Vegas extended and became thicker (*Fig. 15*). The focus lies on pedestrians exploring and strolling around the areas with various themes. Since visitors are moving in all directions, the casino-temptation needs to come from each and every corner and attack many different senses. In the following we are going to explore how hotel-casinos convey the content of a theme to their visitor.

FIG. 14/15



FIG. 14 / MAP OF LAS VEGAS STRIP - 1968
ROBERT VENTURI AND DENISE SCOTT BROWN,
*LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS - THE FORGOTTEN
SYMBOLISM OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM*, CAM-
BRIDGE: THE MIT PRESS, 1993, P. 5.

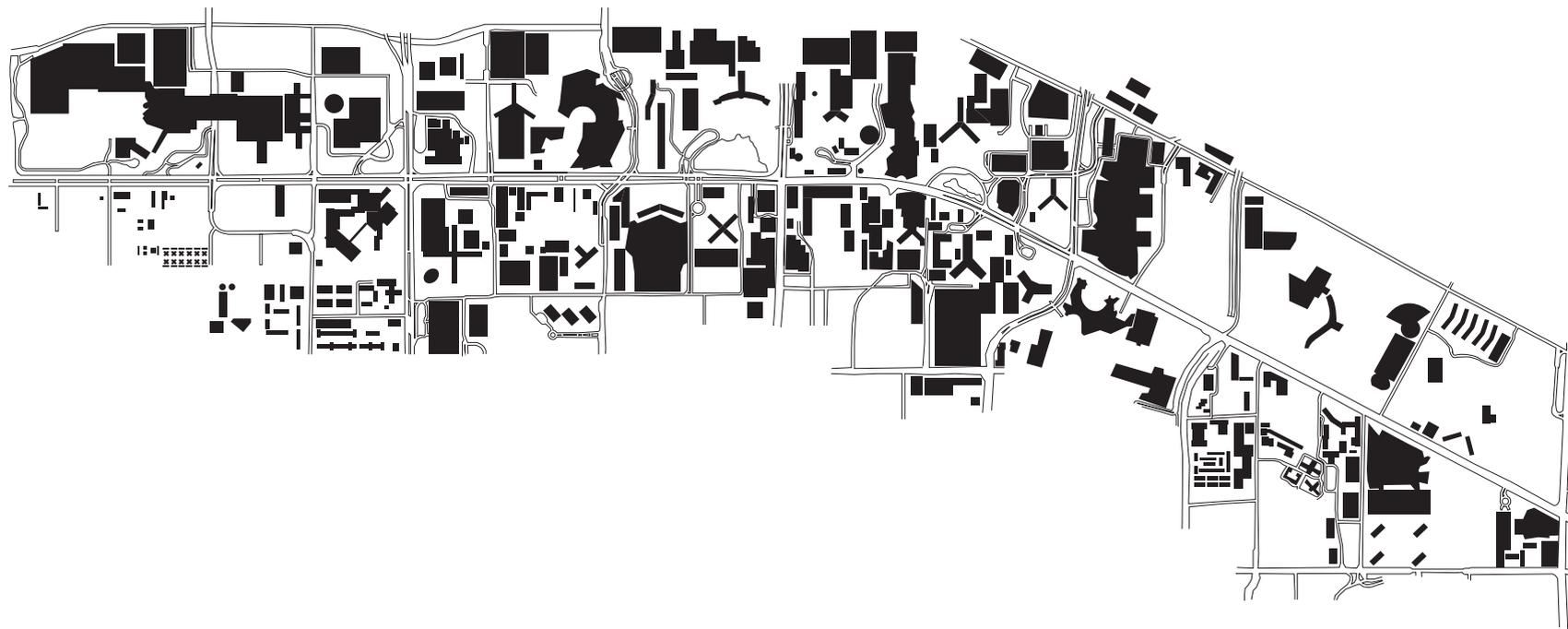


FIG. 15 / MAP OF LAS VEGAS STRIP - 2014
MAP MADE BY MONIKA STEIGER



FIG. 16 / PARIS LAS VEGAS HOTEL & CASINO

IS IT NOT BIZARRE TO USE THE PYRAMID FOR A SPACE
TO SLEEP AND TO GAMBLE SINCE IT WAS ORIGINALLY
USED AS TOMBS?

”

FIG. 16 / PARIS LAS VEGAS HOTEL & CASINO

Quentin Bajac, *Dreamlands – Des parcs d'attractions aux cites du future, Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2010, p. 141, 144, 145.*



The typical signs made in neon, that we immediately have in mind when we think about Las Vegas, have been replaced by themed buildings and their surroundings, which help them in transmitting a certain message to their visitor. We could say, that the signage of today is spread over many thousands of square meters of a hotel-casino. It begins on the sidewalk and ends in the oasis of the establishment. From the columns to the door handle, everything matches and co-ordinates, building an assembly of a specific leitmotif (Fig. 16). Since everything in Las Vegas is now used to communicate, architectural forms as well as signboards can be considered from a semantic point of view. According to Charles William Morris the semantic dimension is following: the relationship of the signs towards the objects, in other words the meaning of the signs in a cultural dimension¹⁸. What can we associate with the names? Hotel-casinos such as Caesars Palace or Excalibur try to revive a certain historical moment, further examples like Paris or Treasure Island attempt to give the atmosphere of an original site. Illustrated by Luxor, which takes the reference of an Egyptian city, the name is playing with exoticism, Egyptian-ness and cultural wealth.

FIG. 16 /
PARIS LAS VEGAS
HOTEL & CASINO

A reproduction of the Great Sphinx of Giza is placed in front of the pyramid and stands as well for the Egyptian culture. Is it not bizarre to use the pyramid for a space to sleep and to gamble since it was originally used as tombs? Not really, since the original symbolic of pyramids leave space to quite different significations. One of them is the idea of exoticism, Egyptian-ness like Barthes would have said. The Mirage Hotel, as the term means Fata morgana as well, refers to a physical phenomena for example in the desert where an object gets mirrored caused by differences in air temperatures. A palm tree as an example seems to the observer close, but in fact it is far away. In the case of the hotel, a replica of a tropical rain forest with a rich vegetation and with waterfalls is directly reachable for the visitors and is not a mirage far away connected to a painful experience. However, is there a better name in Las Vegas for a casino, a place situated in the desert, which plays with our senses in order to offer us all kinds of illusions?

¹⁸ Bernhard E. Bürdek, *Design – Geschichte, Theorie und Praxis der Produktgestaltung*, Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 2005.

40 years ago, the Yale students found out that there are three different systems of messages to understand Las Vegas' sign system: "The heraldic – the signs – dominates; the physiognomic, the messages given by the faces of the buildings – the continuous balconies and regularly spaced picture windows of the Dunes saying HOTEL and the suburban bungalows converted to chapels by the addition of a steeple – and the locational – service stations are found on corner lots, the casino is in front of the hotel, and the ceremonial valet parking is in front of the casino."¹⁹ But this quote does not explain further the heraldic, which describes textual and pictorial signs, for example letterings or logos of establishments. According to Venturi, the information the city transmits to us depends on the location and the appearance of a sign or a building. The meaning of the sign was to comment and to allude to the past and the present while they were including the ordinary. In addition to text, the signs used symbols, which referred to historical-, mythological- or geographical-based subjects. The Aladdin Hotel had for example, not only the written text, but as well a supporting symbol for the name of the hotel. The magic lamp situated at the top of the sign plus the name itself give an association to the fairy tale *One Thousand and One Nights*. Under the name, two light boxes, which announce the next venue, are mounted.

Here again, the sign tells of something exotic and a combination of magic and luck can be discovered.

It drives us back to the mysteries of our childhood tales full of magic occurrences, such as the promise of becoming rich in one night, just by rubbing a lamp.

Three minutes north you will encounter Caesars Palace. This hotel-casino made use of one name that is now representing an entire period in history. Julius Caesar, this name let's us quickly understand the hotel's theme. The name evokes for most of the visitors roman-ness and associated with this immense power, high quality of life and the flourishing of commerce, art and culture. The meaning of the name is reflected in the architecture and in the sign. Already back in 1966 the hotel was built as a simulation of Rome of during the 1st century B.C. Accordingly one of the most advanced signs was standing beside the highway (Fig. 17). Between the bases of the columns that support an architrave are roman centurions and women with fruit bowls. The hotel-casino tried to create a typography that fits the historical background, but, since they used a typography analogical to ancient Greek inscriptions instead of Roman looking letters, we can conclude that the plan failed. Such an observation enlightens us on the limits of historical re-enactment of signs in Las Vegas: it blurs periods in time, it merges Roman and Greek in global "antique", age-old, vintage vibes.

¹⁹ Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas – The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, op.cit., p. 72.

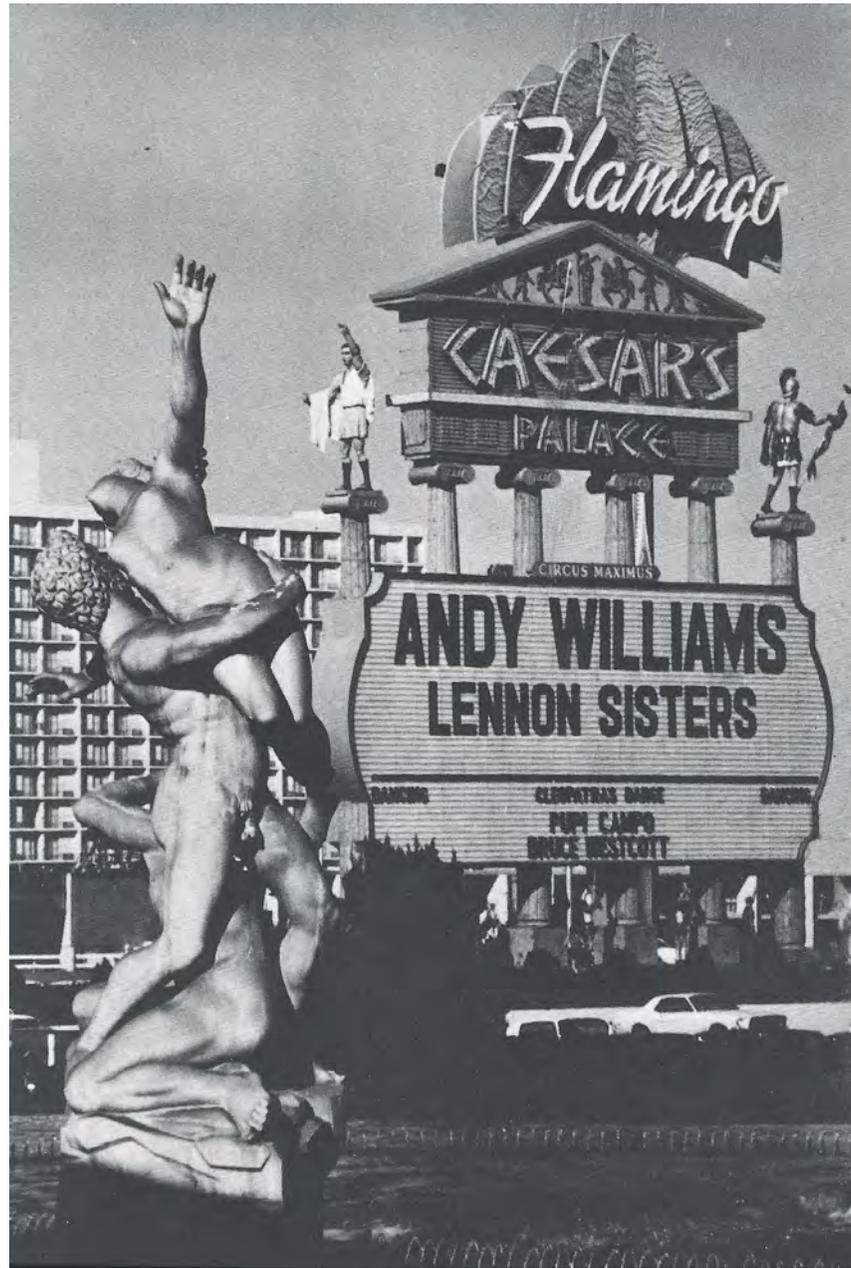


FIG. 17 / CAESARS PALACE SIGNS AND STATUARY FROM 1966

Martino Stierli and Hilar Stadler, *Las Vegas Studio – Bilder aus dem Archiv von Robert Venturi und Denise Scott Brown*, Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess AG, 2008, p. 129 – 130.

Two years after Caesars Palace, the Hotel called Circus Circus opened its doors (Fig. 18). Every hour people can watch a performance in a round building that resembles a big top. If we examine images from 1968, in the back of the circled tent we can see a 15 story-high structure, which does not correspond with Venturi's described flat buildings. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Circus Circus and Caesars Palace did not receive a special reflection in the book about a new era, which was evolving at that time. Was this new penchant for the thematic not as novel as we thought? In the two phases of Las Vegas' history they used corresponding themes that were historical-, mythological- and geographical-based to present a hotel or a casino. Although, they are not implemented in the same manner. The subjects were previously included in the signs, today they show their presence in the architecture and the surroundings of the city landscape. The various stories they tell visitors are familiar to everyone. The tactics of Las Vegas to take existing references of the past and the present is highly direct and a way to avoid misunderstandings. This is precisely what happens with Las Vegas's signs: they operate within the stock archive of occidental stereotypes. There is no pyramid in Luxor, and Romans did not use Greek letters in their inscriptions, but all this does not really matter, since the signs perform their duties: to re-enact popular and collective tales.

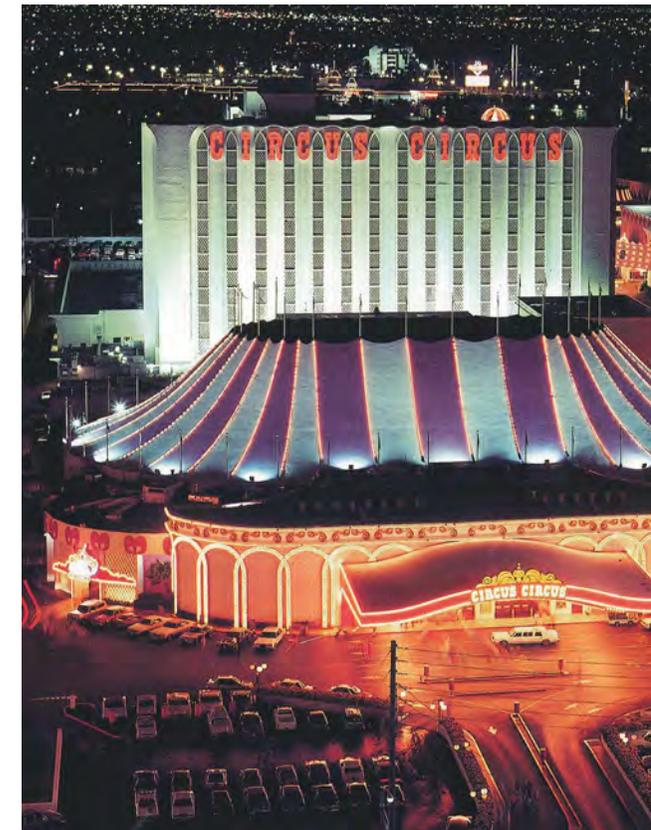


FIG. 18 / CIRCUS CIRCUS HOTEL & CASINO

Charles F. Barnard, *The Magic Sign – The Electric Art / Architecture of Las Vegas*, Cincinnati: ST Publications, 1993, p. 206.

As we already discovered, typographies, names and architecture come from different historical periods and the references the hotel-casinos are working with have a significant role. The themed architecture allows people to forget the time while the city is almost working as a time machine. In one and the same space, people are circulating inside different time periods, moving from one epoch to another (Fig. 19/20).

TODAY'S LAS VEGAS CAN BE SEEN AS AN ARTIFICIAL ASSEMBLAGE, ALMOST LIKE A DREAM, WHERE ALL THE HISTORY IS MERGED TOGETHER INTO ONE.

Seemingly, according to the owners of hotel-casinos, the guests must be constantly occupied by visual attractions.

This is the reason for the complete filling of space and time without any gap in the entertainment. What begins outside the casinos continuous inside. The difference is only, outside you can figure the time through the gap between different architectural references and inside, time does not exist anymore. There are no clocks in sight, people should completely forget time while gambling. Additionally, artificial light instead of daylight aids one in losing any sense of time, which means for the owners of the casinos that visitors stay several hours longer than they may have planned and spend a grand amount of money.

Visiting the city 40 years ago was about diving in and losing yourself, an escape from your daily life. Everybody's dream was to leave the city with a big pile of money. In the late 1960s, the entire city was a-flow with color and light, as if one was experiencing drug-intoxication. Time did

not change from one casino to the next. It was all about the now, but a now that is explicitly reserved for Las Vegas and not to be found in any other city. The inside from yesteryear without any windows and daylight does not differ from today. Venturi wrote: "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."²⁰

The point, which was truly significant in this period regarding time, was the influence the cars had towards the signs. As described above, the signs were made for a certain speed of driving which was generally between 50 to 65 kilometers per hour. In addition, the placement of the buildings was induced by the speed of the vehicles, therefore the space between them was large. If we look at a map, we can see very little architectural structures placed with-in an area of one mile, which is equal to 1.6 kilometers. Due to the speed of the car, the buildings were connected together.

An interesting insertion is the position of the lighting in the public space. Driving on the Strip became a rhythmic composition, in which the regular placed street lamps worked as a metronome and the chaotic arrangements of the signs were the notes. Nowadays, since people do not use cars anymore, the perception of time has changed. Although there are more references to several periods of history, which made me compare Las Vegas to a time machine, the switch from one place to another is slower. The comparison showed that within a very short time period, Las Vegas tried to reinvent itself. The hotel-casinos are revamping continuously, often it happens due to a change of ownership. Almost like a temporary space, it evolves dramatically within 40 years and new shifts will follow as we are going to see later in the study.

FIG. 19

FIG. 20

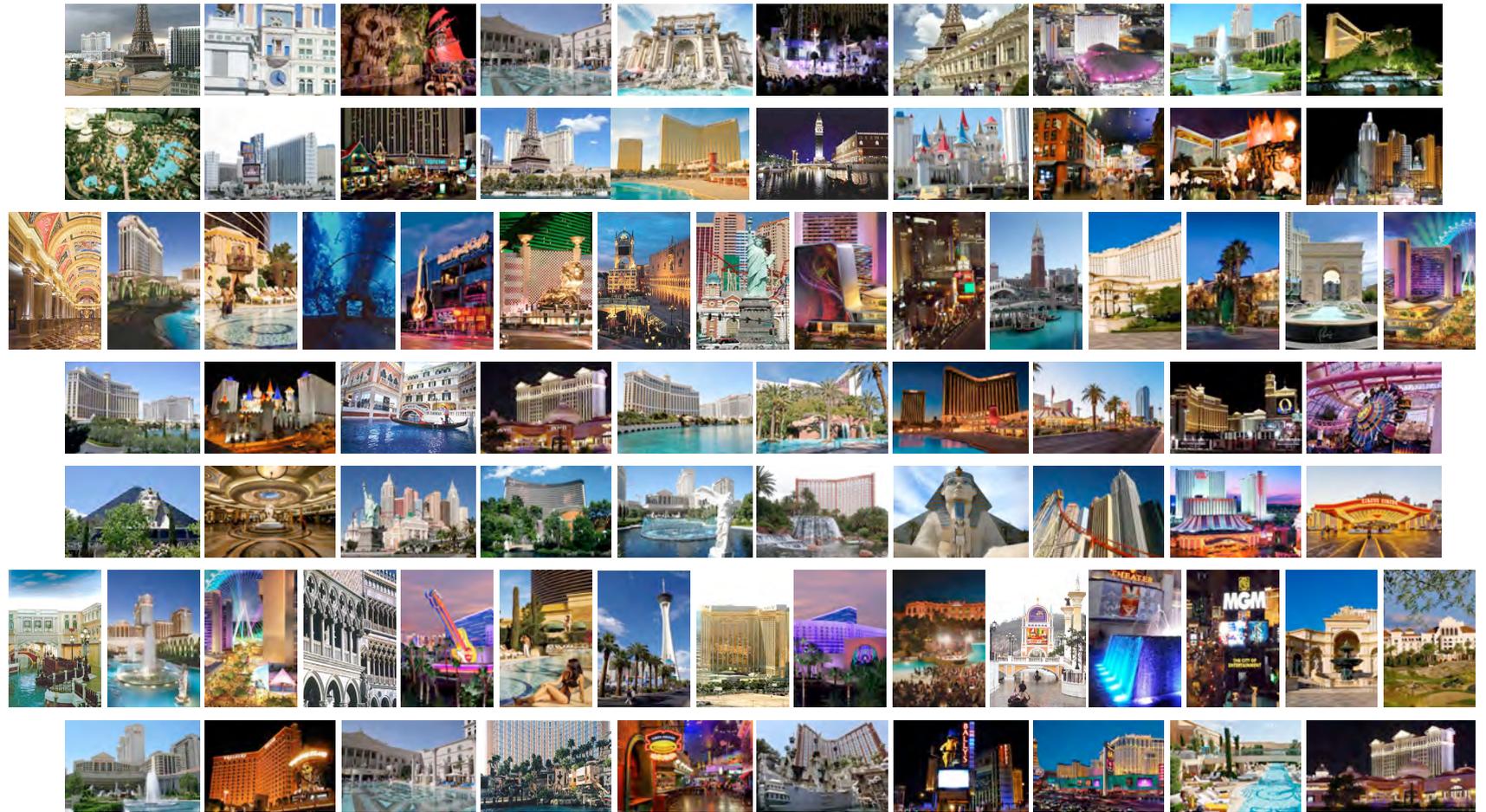


FIG. 19 / OVERVIEW OF LAS VEGAS THEMED ARCHITECTURE - 2014
DIAGRAM MADE BY MONIKA STEIGER



FIG. 20 / LAS VEGAS SIGNS AND BUILDINGS

- 1968

ROBERT VENTURI AND DENISE SCOTT BROWN,
 LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS - THE FORGOTTEN
 SYMBOLISM OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM, CAM-
 BRIDGE: THE MIT PRESS, 1993, P. 62-63.

C O N
P a R T I V
C L U
The POWER of LAS VEGAS PARADIGM
S I O N

The controversial book *Learning from Las Vegas* left its mark on architectural theory and became the reference text for Postmodernism. It was in the 1980s considered a classic and entered into the history of architecture. Venturi's proposal was about the role of the architect in a society dominated by mass media and the future of spatial planning in the context of decentralisation and suburbanisation of American cities in the 20th century. Based on the book, I implemented an investigation about Las Vegas' signs related to architecture. Regarding the core of my essay, Venturi wrote in the book:



“THESE RELATIONSHIPS, AND COMBINATIONS BETWEEN SIGNS AND BUILDINGS, BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND SYMBOLISM, BETWEEN FORM AND MEANING, BETWEEN DRIVER AND THE ROADSIDE ARE DEEPLY RELEVANT TO ARCHITECTURE TODAY AND HAVE BEEN DISCUSSED AT LENGTH BY SEVERAL WRITERS.”²¹

We understand that the relationship between the architecture and the sign was substantial at the time Venturi and Scott Brown lead the Yale studio. Although signs related to architecture evolved from the time when the book appeared compared to today, the present study provides evidence that the relationship is still of importance.

What can we from this reasoning learn from the comparison? What does it mean to study this kind of relationship?

Architecture related to signs is strongly connected to the city as a communication system where the built urban space transmits information through signs and symbols to the user. The urban environment affects people and the signs respectively the architecture as signs facilitate the stay in the city and people are able to find their way. In the late 1960s, Las Vegas was not a place to live, it was more likely a place for those in search of a dream, big money. As a reaction to the stringing together of casinos and hotels in connection with the commercial aspect of seduction, the signs were placed close to the highway respectively mounted on the façade. The car played a relevant role as Las Vegas was built around it and the street was the gate to the entertainments. I tried to show that the form-in-space was, at the time when Venturi and Scott Brown did the trip with their students, distinctly dominated by the symbol-in-space. The city was based on communicative purposes with non-architectural elements.

FIG. 21

Considering all these ideas, we can assume that the signs were based on a homogeneous use of the urban areas. The high number of hotel-casinos caused a permanent rivalry between them. Consequently, the entertainment businesses had to be innovative to stand out from the others. Caesars Palace paved in 1966 the way for a new direction. This change had an influence on the use of the city: Las Vegas is nowadays more heterogeneous. The focus does not lie just on gambling anymore, both young and old are becoming her customers.

In the case of Las Vegas the reasons for the shift were lying in the construction of Caesars Palace as the first themed architecture and the new gambling competitor from the American east coast. Although the communication system changed, the goal of pulling people inside the built spaces stayed the same. Before, the way to catch one's attention happened through signs mounted on shoeboxes and now in 2014 it is the casinos covered by themes and entertainment like erupting volcanoes, which assume the responsibility.

Signs are no more conceived to be read, like the neon signage described by Venturi, but to be seen. Typographic sign has been replaced by iconic sign, the image has now completely invaded the space which was, years before, filled with texts. Las Vegas buildings are precisely the very material of the image.

Therefore, one could see the buildings from today as Venturi's *Ducks*²² (Fig. 21). But in my opinion we have to be careful with this comparison. For Venturi, the duck is used for modernist buildings, since this kind of architecture intends to reflect its function. I have to make an insertion, for Venturi and Scott Brown it was often wishful thinking from the side of the Modernists, they wrote in the book: "As we have said, the symbolism of Modern architecture is usually technological and functional, but when these functional elements work symbolically, they usually do not work functionally."²³ Alan Colquhoun brought it even more to the point. According to him, the function of the modern building is not shown with the help of the vocabulary of architectural forms. They refer more likely to aesthetics of industrial architecture, machines, steamboats and so on, instead of showing the actual program of the building²⁴. Coming back to the contemporary architecture of Las Vegas, which does not reflect as far as I am concerned, its function but more likely it represents the name of the establishment and it personifies and embodies a stereotype. If people consider the architecture of today's Las Vegas as the duck, it is expressed there in an exaggerated way, almost resembling a caricature. While the duck was for Venturi a metaphor, it could be used nowadays as the symptom of a melodrama, as described by Aron Vinegar²⁵.

²² The restaurant "Long Island Duckling" is the prime example for the duck. The duck molded booth was a retail poultry store before it became a souvenir shop. Venturi's duck is a building that tells us about itself through its shape. The building becomes a sculpture and the sign itself. The space, the structure and the program are covered by a symbolic shape. In *Learning from Las Vegas* is the picture of "The Long Island Duckling" quoted from the book "God's own junkyard" by Peter Blake.

²³ Robert Venturi and Denise Scott, *Learning from Las Vegas – The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, op.cit., p. 137.

²⁴ As revealed by Martino Stierli, *Las Vegas im Rückblick – Die Stadt in Theorie, Fotografie und Film*, op. cit.

²⁵ Aron Vinegar, *I am Monument – On Learning from Las Vegas*, Massachusetts: MIT Press books, 2008.

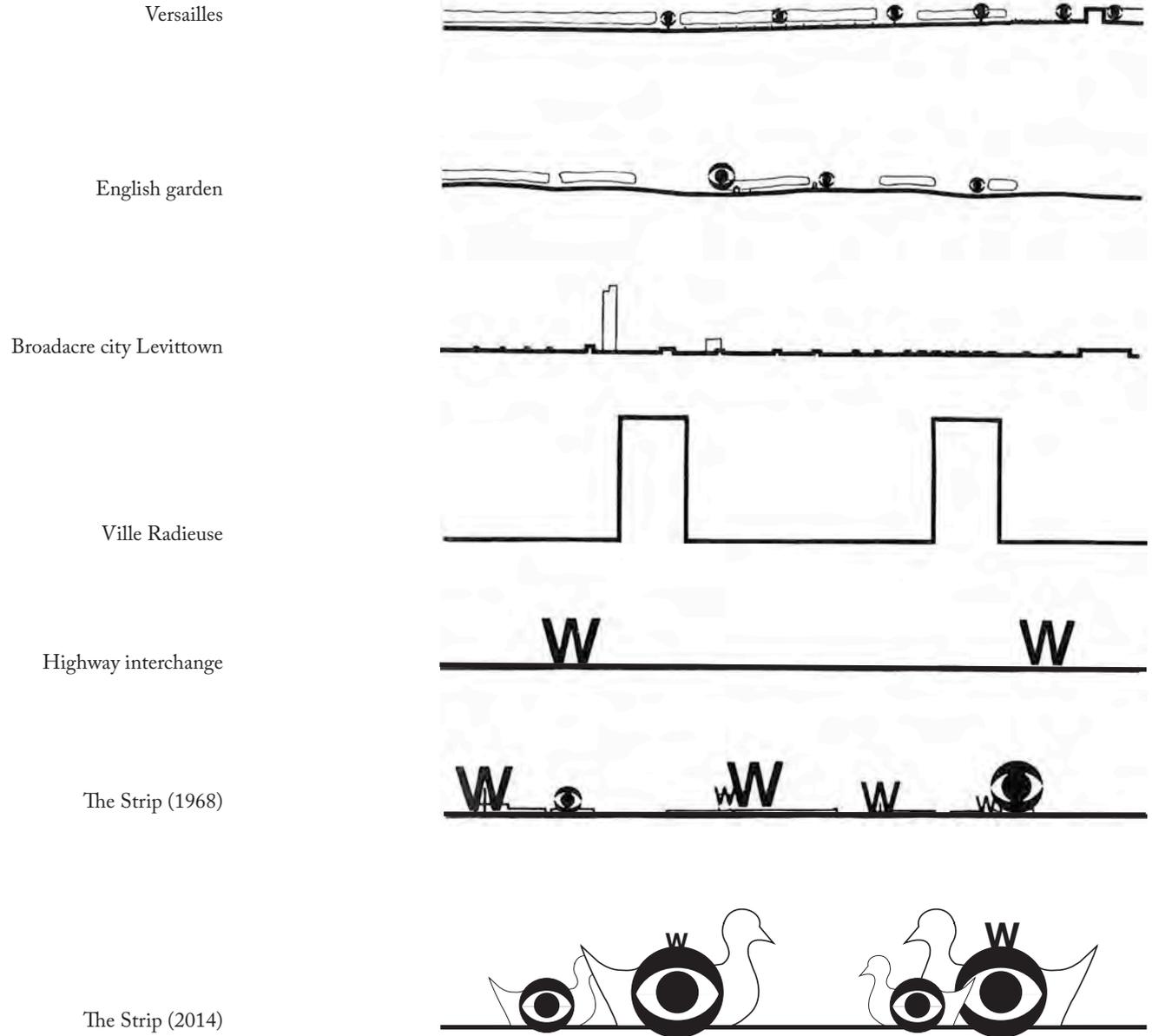


FIG. 21 / A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VAST SPACES - VERSAILLES - STRIP 2014
ROBERT VENTURI AND DENISE SCOTT BROWN,
LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS - THE FORGOTTEN SYMBOLISM OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM, CAMBRIDGE: THE MIT PRESS, 1993, P. 14.
AND LAST DIAGRAM MADE BY MONIKA STEIGER



These observations also lead us to the aspect of the private and the public, two terms, which belong to the classical differentiation that defines the character of the city. „Private“ stands for, since the classical antiquity, the range of household and „public“ for the space of the politics. According to Jürgen Habermas, the loss of the public space is caused by the auto mobilisation²⁶. There was indeed since the publication of the book, a change perceptible towards spaces that became more and more privatised. Nowadays, the private architecture completely dominates the public space. As far as I know, the only elements in the city that stayed public are streets, which are used by cars. Today, even the sidewalks belong to the entertainment businesses. Fremont Street for example, got an immense media roof where the ancient public space is now used for private purposes. The privatisation of the space indicates that certain groups of people do not have access to a specific space. However, isn't the city a huge public space, which should be accessible for everyone? It could be relevant to establish a glimpse into coming years. Las Vegas as a paradigm managed to achieve a shift of the communication system within less than 40 years, which appears to me to be almost out of question. Since the city is looking permanently for a change and not many things there are stable, it would be enthralling to see what the future brings. Instantaneous attractions and the fleetingness are recurring the-

mes. The goal is not to strive for continuous, more likely it is to sell itself at the moment without thinking about later. The city can be seen as a massive testing ground for future urban currents. Looking from today to the prospective time, we are uncertain what is coming after the themed architecture. The fact that Daniel Libeskind, Norman Foster and Helmut Jahn are constructing side by side shows us possible scenarios for the future. These architectural works, which are no longer replicas but originals, try to refer to their own elegance and are not extent on using narrative themes. The name of the architects is enough to attract people. The sign system of the city could be to a certain degree, defined by the names of the star architects.



ARE WELL KNOWN ARCHITECTURAL CLICHÉS LIKE PYRAMIDS AND ROMAN TEMPLES GOING TO BE REPLACED BY WELL-KNOWN ARCHITECTS?

We can wonder if the project called „CityCenter“, which makes an assemblage of star architectural buildings, will continue to grow and occupy Las Vegas in years to come. If so, with this development, the relationship between the architecture and the sign will most necessarily change.

²⁶ As revealed by Martino Stierli, *Las Vegas im Rückblick – Die Stadt in Theorie, Fotografie und Film*, op. cit.

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