

## DAILY FEATURES

## The 1968 Learning from Las Vegas Studio Revisited

“How often does a 22-year-old kid get to share a credit with Piranesi?”

By Stephanie Salomon and Steve Kroeter, *Designers & Books* December 19, 2013

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In the fall of 1968, architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, assisted by Steven Izenour, taught a third-year studio course at the Yale School of Architecture called “Learning from Las Vegas, or Form Analysis as Design Research.” That class would give rise to a **famous book of the same name**, first published in 1972, and would also influence future architectural education methods. The class, which traveled to Las Vegas to analyze a new type of American city, had a huge impact on its 13 students (nine in architecture, two in urban planning, and two in graphic design) who undertook a true collaborative adventure with their three instructors. In connection with an **interview conducted with Denise Scott Brown** earlier this year, publishing in January 2014, *Designers & Books* corresponded with five of the students—45 years after the class—about their memories of the studio, and the publication of the book. Here are some highlights of what they said.

YALE UNIVERSITY  
Department of Architecture  
Fall 1968

Third Year Studio  
R. Venturi  
D. Scott Brown  
S. Izenour

Studio LLV: Learning from Las Vegas, or Form Analysis  
as Design Research.

Introduction

This is to be an investigative studio on Las Vegas. Passing through Las Vegas is Route 91, the archetype of the commercial strip, the phenomenon at its purest and most intense. We believe a careful documentation and analysis of its physical form is as important to architects and urbanists today as were the studies of medieval Europe and ancient Rome and Greece to earlier generations. Such study will help to define a new type of urban form, emerging in America and Europe, radically different from that we have known; one which we have been ill-equipped to deal with and which, from ignorance, we define today as "urban sprawl." An aim of this studio will be, through openminded and non-judgemental investigation, to come to understand this new form and to begin to evolve techniques for its handling. Particular emphasis will be placed on the search for descriptive graphic techniques more suited to such areas than are the conventional maps and drawings inherited from architecture and city planning. Our hope is to produce graphic and other visual techniques as suited to the neon processional of Las Vegas as were Nolli's maps to the baroque geography of 18th century Rome.

The major work in this studio will be analytic; with the synthesis of what we analyse lying not, as with most projects, in a design (although a sketch design will be part of our work) but first in a broader understanding of the "sprawl" phenomenon as is, and second in the evolving of a new graphics for urbanism. This we believe is a necessary prelude to discovering what the strip ought to be, and as such can be called applied design research -- research undertaken by the architect as an aid to design.

The Studio is to be set up as a research project of the Yale Design Group, and, in exchange for financial help, we must be prepared to provide a report on our findings to local, governmental authorities in Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada. This Studio is also an innovation in architectural education in that it attempts, through adapting the format of the city planning or urban design studio, to improve the intellectual level of studio edu-

Third Year Studio  
(Venturi)

Introduction - cont'd

cation and, through a series of lectures to augment the information-giving function to approach that of a good course, while maintaining the synthetic and learning-by-doing tradition of the architectural studio which makes it such valuable training for professional, i.e. action-oriented, careers.

All architectural students wishing to participate will be required to devote their two electives to studio.

Great stress will be placed here on carefully structured independent and small-group research in the field and in the library. This is an essential process if our bright new ideas about the commercial environment are to become part of a deeper architectural insight, tied to all the rest of our architectural selves. Without it supergraphics soon grow superficial.

READING:

By Monday, 23 September all students entering the Las Vegas studio are asked to have read:

Tom Wolfe - "Las Vegas (what) . . . ., Kandy Koloored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby, Paper.

R. Venturi and D. Scott Brown - "Learning from Las Vegas, or A significance for A&P Parking Lots." Arch. Forum, March 1968.

J.B. Jackson - "Other Directed Houses". Landscape, Winter 1957.

"The Abstract World of the Hot-Rodder"  
Landscape, Autumn 1967.

Collection of Publicity Information on Las Vegas.

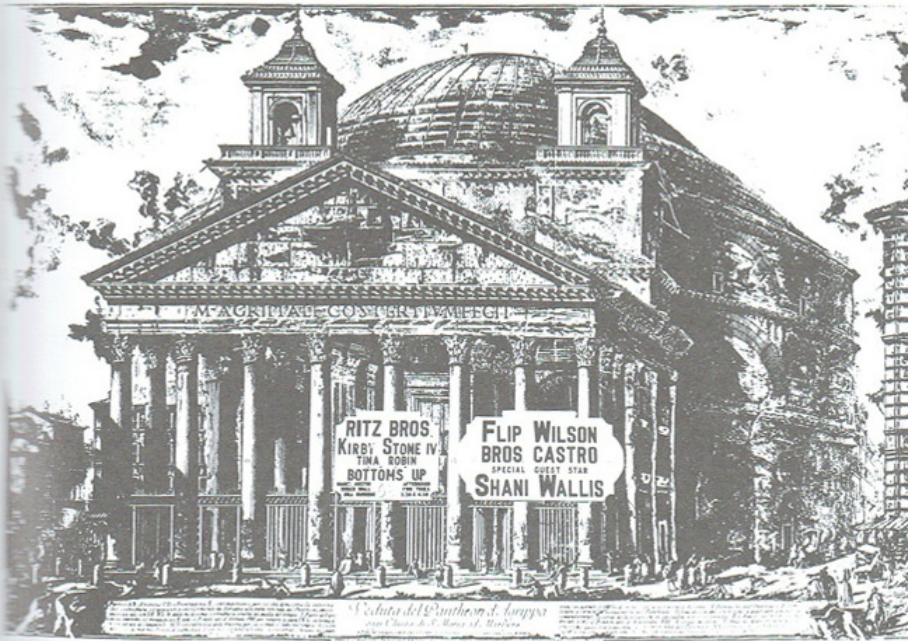
**Ronald Filson, FAAR, FAIA, Dean and Professor Emeritus of Tulane University's School of Architecture:**

I was in the unique position of working at MLTW/Moore Turnbull the summer before the studio. The office was just across the street from the A&A building and I remember Charles Moore escorting Bob Venturi (aka "The Vent") through the office a couple of times. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* was, for me and many others, the most significant influence in architecture in a long time. I found there to be a lot of similarities between Bob and Chuck's writing and work. Steve Izenour also worked at Moore/Turnbull that summer and he and I and others would often carry on against the heroic form-givers around us. This became a big source of amusement that summer. I'm not sure whether Bob and Denise specifically recruited Steve to be the graduate assistant or if Charles Moore assigned him to the studio. It was clear to me that "Learning from Las Vegas" was going to be the most important thing around that fall and I asked Steve to be sure to get me in the studio. I may have threatened bodily harm. He did register me for the studio.

I was put on the “Signs” team with Martha Wagner, a graphic design student. I thought this would be a great part of the studio and was very excited about it. We did a series of drawings and schedules that tried to explain the role of signage and graphic symbols in the new frontier of strip architecture. Our excitement with the studio encouraged Dan Scully and me to make a proposal for the Rome Prize. We titled it “From Las Vegas to Rome.” We were successful and found our lives changed by the experience at the American Academy in Rome.

We did a few drawings that only a crazed third-year student with too little sleep could produce. The “entire strip in words” was a transcription of every word of every sign along the strip. [illus. 28, p. 30] I can’t believe the number of hours that I spent slumped over a film-editing machine extracting from the documentary filming of the “Ed Ruscha” strips. This was done with an old-fashioned lettering template, a relic even then. I tried to assemble the words in a way that revealed their importance. I also did the drawing that was labeled “the physiognomy of a sign.” [illus. 68, p. 67] It showed how the Stardust sign divided its formal and content roles. My favorite claim to fame was the collage of the Pantheon with casino signs superimposed on the temple front. How often does a 22-year-old kid get to share a credit with Piranesi?





61. Piranesi's Pantheon/Caesar's Palace sign



62. Caesars Palace centurions

From *Learning from Las Vegas*, 2nd edition (1977, The MIT Press), illus. 68, p. 67. "Piranesi's Pantheon/Caesar's Palace sign" (top) by Ron Filson and Martha Wagner. Courtesy of The MIT Press

The introduction that Bob and Denise gave at the beginning was so comprehensive and thorough my mind was reeling. The workload that Denise laid out made it seem that we had just arrived at Paris Island for Marine boot camp. The LA portion of the trip was amazing. We met with Esther McCoy, Ed Ruscha, and many others to try to understand the conceptual underpinnings of our work. This was my first trip to LA although I ended up teaching at UCLA from 1974 until 1980.

When we got to Las Vegas a lot was going on. Denise's assigned workload left little time for

anything but work but somehow a few of us managed to waste a little time at blackjack. I went with maybe \$40 of spending money and somehow managed to stay afloat for the time we there. Our progress meetings with Bob and Denise were intense and really kept up group enthusiasm. Somehow I wangled my way on the helicopter that we used for aerial work and despite a fear of heights remember hanging over the side photographing the largest casino signs up close. Another fond memory is the opening of the Circus Circus Casino, and another was representing the group on a television interview that Bob and Denise set up. I think I was chosen because I had the shortest hair and loudest American flag tie.



Students at the opening of the Circus Circus Casino. Las Vegas, 1968; Tony Farmer (left), Peter Schmitt (center), and Martha Wagner (right). "Denise somehow managed to get us tickets and it certainly was, for me at least, the biggest extravaganza I'd seen. We all made costumes with discards from Goodwill and Day-Glo spray paint." —Ronald Filson, 2013. Photo: Ronald Filson

#### **Charles Korn, New York:**

I decided to sign up for the Las Vegas studio because Denise, Bob, and Steve were a deeply engaging team. I liked their presentation. And the metaphor of Las Vegas and the opportunity to learn there together with them and other Yalies did not leave me with hesitation or ambivalence. I was enthusiastic and ready to lock and load.

My task was the broad responsibility for the history of Las Vegas and its growth. Also to meet with elected officials like the mayor and others who held political responsibility for the town's zoning and other issues relating to urban density, etc. I enjoyed meeting and interviewing them. All meetings with Denise and those occasions when Bob joined us were memorable because they encouraged, demanded, cajoled, and supported us in their unique style.





Photos by Peter Behrens

## LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS

By Paul Richard

Call it roadside clutter. Or the neon wasteland. Or God's own junkyard. Or commercial sprawl. There's no set name for it.

In Las Vegas, Nev., it's called the Strip.

The city beautifiers hate it. They flinch at its vulgarity. They shudder at its messiness. They wish that it would go away.

Most architects take one look at those titanic dazzlers spinning above the gas stations and begin dreaming of bulldozers, rectangles, and trees.

But not all of them. Fifteen graduate students with a different point of view from Yale University's school of art and architecture have just completed a five-month study of the Las Vegas Strip.

They made no attempt to explore the morality of Las Vegas industries or the elec-

"The Yale architects might have studied Washington's New York Avenue or Maryland's Old Marlboro Pike or a thousand other highways . . .

The Strip was selected because it is an architectural exaggeration of all those other roads."

gance of Las Vegas style. They went to Las Vegas not to fix it or to redesign it, but to learn from it.

The Yale students, under the guidance of the husband-and-wife team of Robert and Denise Venturi, called their project L.L.V., Learning Las Vegas. It was designed to do exactly that.

It was designed to investigate a spectacular new kind of architecture, an architecture that has grown up all around us, composed not of buildings or of spaces but of signs.

The Yale architects might have studied Washington's

New York Avenue or Maryland's Old Marlboro Pike or a thousand other highways in a thousand other towns.

The Strip was selected because it is an architectural exaggeration of all those other roads. No master plan has tamed it. It represents roadside commercial architecture in its wildest and purest state.

Here architecture—in the traditional sense—is important. Each building of the Strip is low, nondescript and inexpensive. The thing that matters is the sign.

The signs of Las Vegas re-

voive. They talk ("flowdy Partner"). They oscillate. They flash.

They compose the landscape. If you stand a mile away in the Nevada desert, you see no buildings, no trees, only signs.

The signs come in a thousand different sizes. There are little ones that say things like "Ladies." There are larger ones that say "Bou" and "Motel." And then there are the giants.

The Dunes Casino, an otherwise modest building, is marked by a pulsating, electrical creation 25 stories tall. The sign of the Stardust Casino is equally impressive. As animated as a movie, and

fully computerized, it eventually will be a quarter-mile long.

The students believe the signs do more than decorate the landscape. They activate and unify the Strip.

A quarter-century ago, before casinos transformed Las Vegas, the Strip was just another fast and open road.

It was a highway designed not for pedestrians or for horses but for moving cars.

Drivers zoomed by. Signs had to catch their attention before it was too late. If no one stopped, no one gambled, if no one gambled—ate, or slept, or purchased gas—the casino—or the diner or the motel or the gas station—died.

Land was cheap. So was cinderblock for buildings. The thing that counted was the sign.

Robert Venturi, the brilliant young architect who organized the L.L.V. project, has

See SHOW, KK, Col. 5

### Learning Las Vegas

Las Vegas, where the local architecture is composed less of buildings than of signs, was the subject of L.L.V., the five-month Learning Las Vegas project conducted by 15 third-year graduate students in Yale University's school of art and architecture. Above are downtown Las Vegas where the signs are dense and the sign-infested Strip.

## Late TV Highlights

The following information was received after the TV CHANNELS magazine went to press:

11 a.m. (3) **Firing Line**. Muhammad Ali, former heavyweight boxing champion Cassius Clay, tells why he renounced his name, refused to serve in the armed forces and embraced the Islamic faith.

11:30 a.m. (4) **Dimension**. Washington, Sen. Charles Mc C. Mathias (R-MD) discusses the problems of the Washington area to a 60 million area faced by the Nixon administration.

News (5) **Georgetown University**. Foreign students at Georgetown University give their candid impressions of the U.S. and its people. Participants include students from the Republic of Guinea, West Africa, Ohio Dominican from Miami and Ohio Wesleyan from Cleveland.

News (6) **Evans Novak Report**. Political analysis Howard Evans and Robert Novak interview Alfie Glen Ramsey Clark who discusses his future plans and the accomplishments of his office during his tenure.

News (7) **Report From Capitol Hill**. Today's guests are Rep. Gilbert Goss (R-ME), Sen. Joseph P. Biden (D-VA) and Lawrence Hogan (R-MD).

12:30 p.m. (8) **Moving of the Minds**. Abraham Brumberg, editor of the USA magazine "Problems of Communism" is interviewed.

12:30 p.m. (9) **Face the Nation**. Sen. Fred R. Harris, senior senator from Oklahoma and new Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, is interviewed.

1 p.m. (10) **Meet the Press**. George E. Christian, press secretary to President Johnson, is interviewed by Tom Wicker of the New York Times and Peter Lang of the Chicago Daily News.

1 p.m. (11) **Come Closer**. Today's program will cover the Voice of Democracy Contest, D.C. Finals.

1:30 p.m. (12) **Hours and Answers**. Sen. Hugh D. Scott (R-PA), GOP Senate Whip,



"Was she hell do they mean—'light? That they cost me ten thousand bucks!"

Drawing by Donald Bell

© 1969 The New York Magazine, Inc.

## Music In Color

KIRCHNER, From *KI*

physical joy is actually doing things with music—as in a studio when you bring the theme back and so on... I think there is too much serious in music

## Back Alley Theater Auditions

The Back Alley Theater will hold auditions for Arthur Miller's "A View From the Bridge" Monday through Friday, from 7 to 10 p.m. and Saturday, Jan. 25, from 3 to 6 p.m. at the Church of the Resurrection, 212 East Capitol St. The Back Alley Theater casts strictly according to talent. Three women and eight men are needed for the present production. Also needed are makeup people, electricians and sound technicians. For further information call 322-3962.

## Las Vegas' Sign Language

**SIGN**, from *KI*  
draws a small cartoon which describes not only the Las Vegas Strip but a thousand other similar stretches of commercial sprawl. It looks like this:



The thing with wheels is a car. The box with windows is a building. The giant lightning is a roadside sign. The sign, if it hovers over Vegas, might say "classical" or "Cassini" or "Win Cash Here." Elsewhere it might say other things like "Gar" or "Gas" or "Groceries" or "State Police."

Wherever the message, the architecture is the same. The little building in the back, obscured by the ranks of cars before it, is wholly dependent on its sign.

The LLV project analyzed thousands of signs, not only signs with written messages but other signs as well. The captured sign in the picture in the picture on the right page references Charles Palace, promising Domino orphans, better than any words.

If an oval reading "Circus" translates into "Circus," a large illuminated pump provides a message that's very much the same.

However, Venturi quotes Henri Bergson, in an order that we cannot see. As the students studied the chaos of the Strip, an order, or at least the beginnings of an order, started to emerge. Far, they found, the signs together formed a system, an architecture of ornamentation, that made the area function.

Seen together they provided a sense of color, light, that gave the Strip its special look, its mood.

But while contributing to

the general spirit of the place, the signs worked independently as well.

Venturi has noted that the giant sign announcing the Aladdin Casino is echoed by a smaller sign marking the Aladdin parking lot. Similar signs, on menus, doors and addresses throughout the Aladdin precinct, worked to organize the otherwise unbounded area that they served.

Signs in Las Vegas not only provide unity and information. They establish mood. Each Strip casino struggles to construct its own world of Hollywood make-believe. One promises Roman origins. Another hints at transparent painted baron gifts. The signs help set the mood. So do the statues, the doorposts, the columns of the hotel help—all things that work as signs.

While the signs of Las Vegas, as of other commercial strips, support the architecture that they serve, Venturi suggests another step. Why shouldn't the building, the architecture itself, become the sign?

The idea sounds radical, but it is far from new. Lots of buildings work as signs. The Dome of the Capitol on the inside. It does not convey a sign except "Congress" but it might as well. The building housing Las Vegas' largest casino, the casino is called "Circus, Circus" and the building that houses it is an enormous pink-and-white striped tent made not of canvas but of concrete.

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The Birth Moment

Part of west fringe of Parklawn.

Our sign has come to distrust such architectural flamboyance. Our modern architects push purity, anonymity, restraint.

One sign, see look, one severe rectilinear geometry dominates our newer buildings. The roots of that look can be found in a rejection of 19th century eclecticism. In a sudden acceptance of the plain industrial vernacular of factory architecture.

Early modern architects, refused to make their buildings look like Roman temples or Romanesque churches made them look like factories instead.

Maybe, soon, the wheel will turn. Architects impatient with the established style, may well turn to something richer, bolder, more individual, more complex.

It should be possible to design a commercial area as rich and jazzy as the Las Vegas Strip. The Strip grew there by itself. An architect with taste and skill and elegance should be able to make it sing.

Insight would be required. Insight, however, is in short supply. Las Vegas recently published a multi-million dollar plan to guide the "rejuvenation" of The Strip. Las Vegas officials showed no interest in the Yale research. They had designers of their own.

Their beautification plan calls for lots of fountains, lots of trees. The trees would hide the signs, but the drawings didn't show that. The drawings didn't show a single sign.

**INTRODUCING THE FIRST REGULAR APPEARANCES OF MARYLAND'S OWN BALTIMORE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**  
SERGIU COMISSIONA, Music Director  
Effective, 1969-1970  
Lisner Auditorium of the George Washington University

Excerpts from Washington Post article on the visit to Las Vegas by the 1968 Yale studio members, January 19, 1969. The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown

## Daniel V. Scully, Scully Architects, Keene, NH:

What made me sign up for the studio? I was already very moved by some of "The Vent's" small and very powerful early houses. He was the Man, the man who continued that great Philadelphia School tradition that included Furness, Sullivan, and through to Louis Kahn.

It was an era when you had to make choices: The Beatles or the Rolling Stones? Charlie Moore or Bob Venturi? Tough maybe, but clear choices. It was about the Highway. It involved automobiles—I had no choice—it was the meat of my own obsessions.

In Las Vegas I was one of two assigned to "Buildings as Communication Systems." How did the shape, the form, the skin of the building communicate? What values did it communicate, and how? Perhaps most interesting were the times we saw a layering of imagery, layered one upon the next generation of meaning, layered upon the past. The layering of history, in a place with essentially no depth of history, led Ron Filson and I to a look at the truly multi-generational layering of images and meaning in Rome. We spent the year following the LLV Studio at the American Academy in Rome on a thesis project entitled "Las Vegas to Rome."

I remember clearly realizing the great depth of informative analysis Denise, as city planner, organized into the studio; and that Bob, as architect, probably learned all he needed to by a few trips up and down The Strip.

## Douglas Southworth, Architect, Lummi Island, WA:

As an undergraduate architecture student at the University of California, Berkeley, I happened to read Bob Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. I found it to be the most interesting book that I had read on the subject of architecture to date. In addition, Steve Izenour, a fellow Master's class student and a good friend of mine encouraged me to sign up for the studio.

My assignment was to come up with a Nolli map of Las Vegas. [illus. 19-20, pp. 24-25; illus. 30, p. 31]. I vaguely remember "volunteering" to do "Illumination levels on the Strip" [illus 23, p. 27] and the Ed Ruscha elevation of The Strip [illus 33, pp. 32-33]





31. Fremont Street



32. Fremont Street casino entrance



33. A detail from an "Edward Ruscha" elevation of the Strip. Tourist maps are made of the Grand Canal and the Rhine showing the route lined by its palaces. Ruscha made one of the Sunset Strip. We imitated his for the Las Vegas Strip.

Detail of "Edward Ruscha elevation of The Strip" by Douglas Southworth (bottom). From *From Learning from Las Vegas*, 2nd edition (1977, The MIT Press), illus. 33, pp. 32-33. Courtesy of The MIT Press

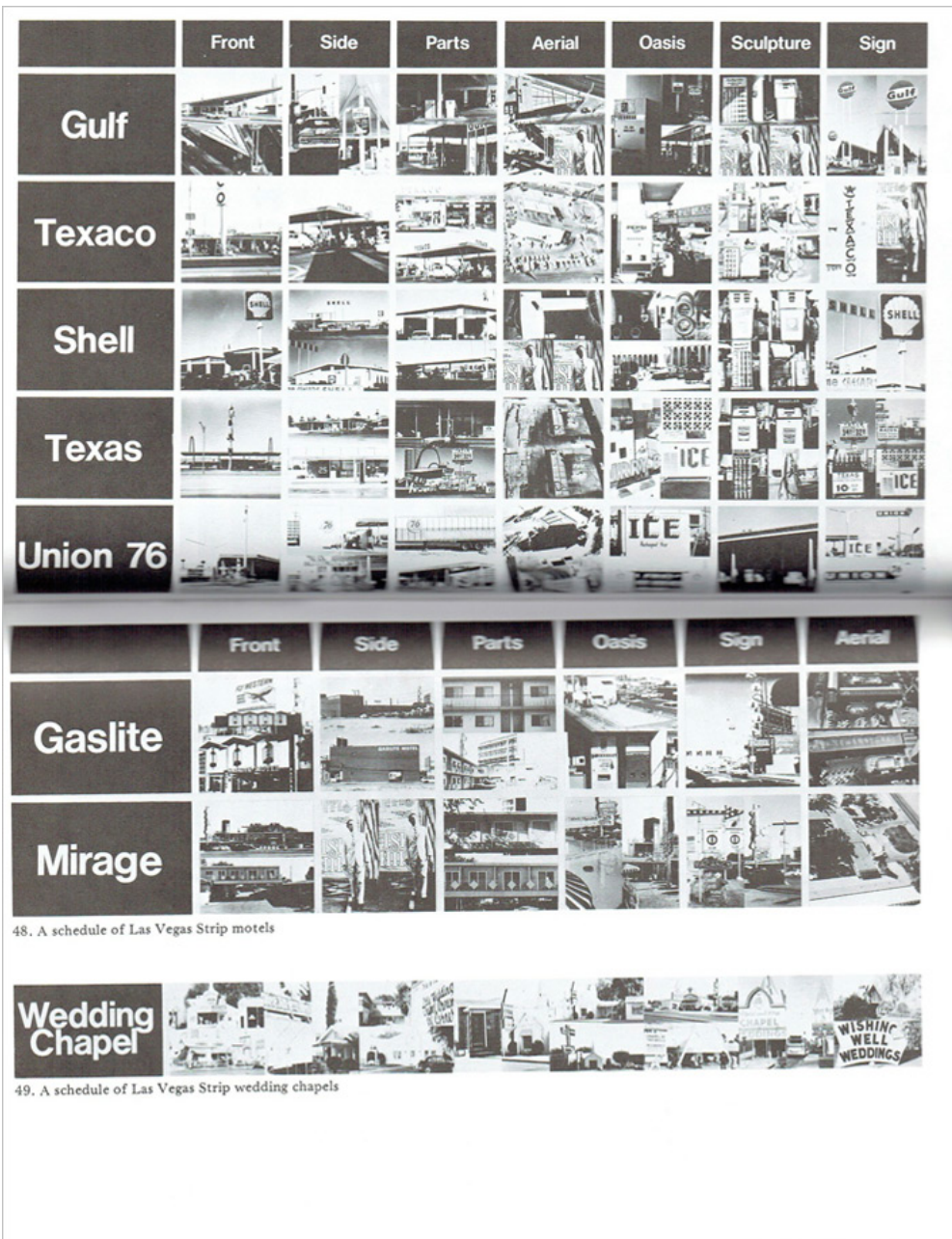
The three most memorable events were meeting with Ed Ruscha at his studio in Los Angeles; visiting the Young Electric Sign Co. in Las Vegas; and attending the grand opening of the Circus Circus Casino.

My reaction to the book when it came out (short-sighted in retrospect) was that it should have been three books. So much so that I had my copy taken apart and rebound into three separate books. I still own my "split- apart" copy.

Shortly after graduation I went to work for Venturi and Rauch building an architectural model for their entry in the Yale Mathematics Building Competition. A few years later I returned to the firm and worked there full-time for a while. My connection with Bob and Denise was easily the most significant teacher/student relationship that I ever had in the architectural realm.

**Peter Hoyt, architect, AIA emeritus, Cincinnati, OH:**

I ended up being responsible for the drawings used in the exhibit and the book in the categories of hotels, motels, casinos, gas stations, and wedding chapels. I also did a lot of the photography and the mounting of photos and drawings on the boards used in the exhibit and ultimately the book. They are the ones in color where plans and sections are compared in a rigorous way as Denise Scott Brown always wanted.



48. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip motels

49. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip wedding chapels

Schedules of Las Vegas Strip motels and wedding chapels by Peter Hoyt. From *Learning from Las Vegas*, 2nd edition (1977, The MIT Press), illus. 48–49, pp. 46–47. Courtesy of The MIT Press

Denise in particular really drove us to have the highest standards in our research and documentation. She had her eye on the prize, the exhibit and book, and knew it would be memorable. It sounds like we did not have much fun but that is not correct; the studio was lucky to have two great leaders and they understood students so we had a great balance. When we went to Las Vegas we did lots of crazy stunts, like crashing the opening of Circus Circus Casino in costumes from the local thrift shops. The trip to LA featured tours of great LA sites, meetings with Esther McCoy, and even a trip to Disneyland (a very big deal in 1967!).

When the book came out several years later I was blown away, thanks to the work of Steve Izenour especially. Denise Scott Brown was so focused on the details, so it was not surprising.

This project was one of the most memorable parts of my Yale education. I think in particular that Denise Scott Brown should have been honored for her work by the Pritzker Committee as she was essential to all Bob's work as an intellectual and creative partner, but that is another story.

Illustration and page numbers refer to the second edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* (1977, The MIT Press).

For kind assistance in contacting former students of the 1968 studio course we are grateful to Jean F. Sielaff, Senior Administrative Assistant to the Dean, Yale School of Architecture. We also thank the students who graciously shared their reflections: Ronald Filson, Peter Hoyt, Charles Korn, Daniel Scully, and Douglas Southworth. The other students in the course were Ralph Carlson, Tony Farmer, Glen Hodges, John Kranz, Peter Schlaifer, Peter Schmitt, Martha Wagner, and Tony Zunino.

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