

Interview with Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi: Is and Ought

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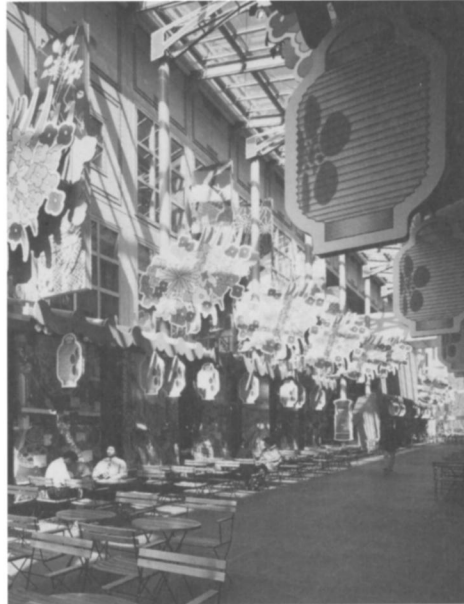
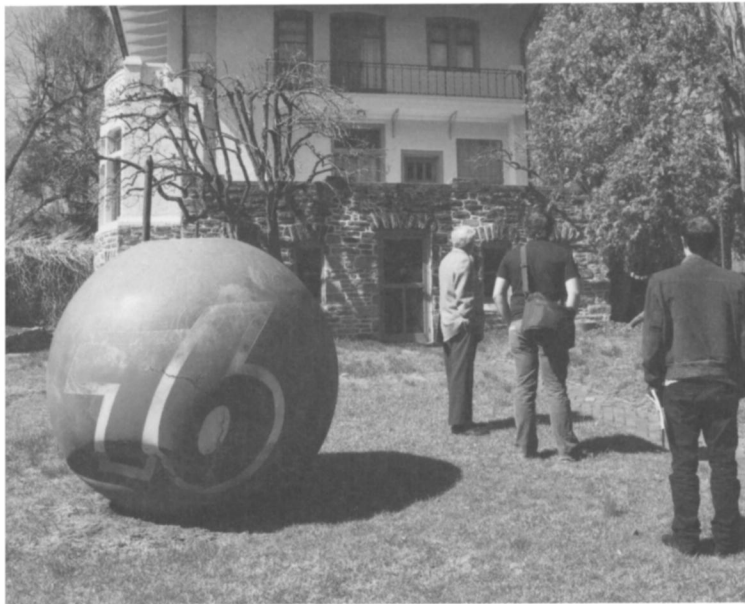
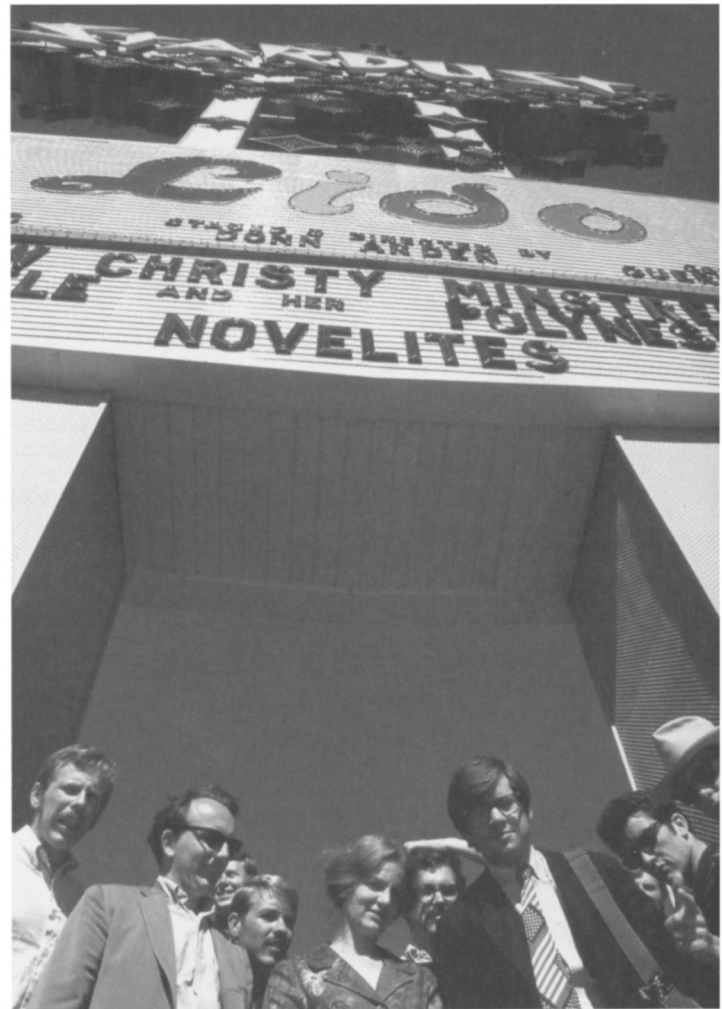
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INTERVIEW WITH DENISE SCOTT BROWN AND ROBERT VENTURI

IS AND OUGHT

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DSB & RV

DSB In the 1940s, the culture of English-speaking South Africa was dominated by England. As a child, I remember hearing English expats saying, "If you just look at that little corner of the landscape, it could be Surrey." And I remember thinking, "Why does the veld have to look like Surrey to be beautiful?" Political fault lines were everywhere in South African society at the time, but one issue was insidious rather than blatant. This was the tension between is and ought. As a recent colony, we were made to feel that we "ought" to be like the mother country, that English landscapes, for example, should be the model for our beauty. But I thought the African landscape—the "is" around me—was beautiful enough, and I didn't go along with the English oughts. I observed the same attitude in London in the 1950s, while I was studying at the Architectural Association. I learned that planning policy for postwar rebuilding was foisting a middle-class way of life onto bombed-out urban slum residents by moving them into new towns at the outskirts of cities. The "oughts" of middle-class planners were causing the people they planned for considerable suffering.

Given my experience of political schisms in Africa and England, I found the early rumblings of social revolution in America quite familiar when I arrived in 1958. But social critiques in the U.S. were more codified than those in England. Social scientists like Herbert Gans and Jane Jacobs and their followers, the social planners, dealt with the "is" and the "ought" in urban planning in a scholarly way. They were my mentors as I tried to make the social concern I had learned in Africa and Europe relevant professionally.

Mannerism in historical architecture was a parallel theme and an interest Bob and I found we shared when we met in 1960.

RV I had arrived in Rome intending to focus on Baroque architecture but, just as my two years there ended, I realize that Mannerism was my main historical interest. This was a major conclusion.

DSB It was, too, for me. The English New Brutalist architects who were trying to learn how city people really lived, came to see Mannerism as a model for the breaking of rules in urbanism. I agreed and felt a Mannerist outlook could help us confront the gap between is and ought in planning and design.

It sounds as though your youth preconditioned you to be sensitive to "foreign" experiences. Many people travel for no other reason than to experience something different—but, in your case, does travel have as much to do with coming home as with leaving?

DSB Perhaps travel helps you learn what is inherently important for you. In a strange way, it sends you back to your own culture. When I got to planning school in America, I immediately began trying to interpret South Africa. I spent hours in the library on a term paper comparing public housing policy in South Africa, the U.K., and America. That's common with foreign students. They get a great interest in understanding their own culture and comparing it to other places. And I've wanted to do this ever since.

RV That also applied to me. That's why I could come back to the U.S. and look at Main Street. I could love the Roman piazza, but after I'd seen it I could see the ordinary in America in new ways. I think it's significant that at that time, looking at history and looking at the everyday was something you really didn't do. Sure, you traveled a bit, but if you did, you looked at the modern stuff.

DSB I went from Africa to Europe, let's say Rome—we've used Rome as a metaphor for Europe. Then from Rome to Las Vegas and from Las Vegas

Strip, desert, Venturi; Learning from Las Vegas studio, Las Vegas, 1968. Scott Brown and Izenour with Yale students under the Stardust sign; Learning from Las Vegas studio, Las Vegas, 1968. Campus planning study, Tsinghua University, Beijing, 2004. Images © Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc. Venturi and Scott Brown

outside their Philadelphia residence with the editors of *Perspecta* 41, 2008. © Colin Montgomery. Interior street; Mielparque Nikko Kirifuri Hotel and Spa, Nikko National Park, Japan, 1997. © Kawasumi Architectural Photograph Office. Source materials; Mielparque Nikko Kirifuri Hotel and Spa. © Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc.

For photos from Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi's home, see pages 126–129.

back again to Rome. We learned from Las Vegas to reinterpret Rome as symbolic architecture, not just as abstract space and volume. But there was another trip: Africa to Rome, Rome to Las Vegas, then Rem Koolhaas took over and added Las Vegas to Lagos. This leg completed my circle.

If Bob and I have a somewhat skewed view of things, it's because we see ourselves as marginal. Marginal people hear a different drummer. We feel this is why we can learn from Las Vegas as well as Rome. And Rem is marginal too—maybe because he grew up partly in Indonesia.

Is the marginal experience a prerequisite for developing a personal reading of a place? Or can architects be taught to think and look in these ways?

DSB It's probably not a prerequisite. Our childhoods may have given us a slightly skewed vision, but others could have had the same experience without that result. I don't know what causes it. It's probably more complex than simply feeling out of place where you grew up, but that's what it was for both Bob and me. We were put into WASP cultures, where we felt we didn't belong.

RV I was an Italian-American Quaker.

DSB And I was a South African Eastern European Jew set in an upper-middle-class WASP prep school. That will do it every time! But I think that today many people will have this marginal experience. As they live as expatriates, moving from place to place and among different cultures, they'll become, as we did, "visiting anthropologists." That's something that Bob and I wrote about in *Architecture as Signs and Systems: For a Mannerist Time*.

Would it be correct to say that travel gave you a set of intellectual tools with which you could come back and look at your home turf, rather than giving you fodder for your design work, as was the case with the historical Grand Tour?

RV I think it allowed me to open my mind and find relevance in a broad spectrum of things, opportunities, places.

DSB It *did* give us fodder for our work. We certainly learned from all we saw. But it also gave us swivel-tilted heads—we're always looking—and a particular way of looking. So when we visit some set piece of architecture, we tend to find its surroundings equally fascinating, for the context they give the monument but also for themselves. And we look intensely during our daily travels too. Our morning trip to work down Shurs Lane to Main Street contains the landscapes and buildings of an early industrial town overlaid by a twentieth-century infrastructure of rail, road, and power lines. The whole is a cityscape beautiful in a way no individual designer could have conceived, and constantly refreshing to us.

We want to ask you about travel as it relates to pedagogy. The trip you took with students to Las Vegas has now been institutionalized at schools like Yale. Yale's advanced studios have recently traveled to Iceland, Japan, India, Venice, and Abu Dhabi. Some people think it's ridiculous that studios travel for only one week, that this kind of travel can't result in academic research.

DSB I think that, as a professional, you should have a philosophy of how to look and a purpose in looking that dictates your subjects of study. We used techniques to analyze and visualize, most of which came from cartography, economics, and urban planning. We lifted other techniques from transportation planning, urban sociology, cultural anthropology, iconography, art and architectural history, and Pop Art. Our students set off for Las Vegas with a booklet this thick, asking, "How could you have written so many work programs for us?" But once they got there, they found our guidelines thin indeed!

At planning school, I was taught to see an urban problem as a complex of many variables, and to consider carefully which variables were appropriate to analyze. What are the salient variables, how do you find and depict them, how do you analyze them? Britton Harris used to describe the whale theory of collecting data. The whale opens its mouth and swims, swallowing whatever is in its path. But this doesn't work well where major data may lie off one's path. So how do you develop a sense of the issues of the study at the outset and establish its broad directions before you start collecting data? And what do you do with the information once you have it, to make it usable for design? These are questions to ask while traveling to research.

What do you think of the Harvard Project on the City? Rem Koolhaas has taken students to what some would consider unlikely sites for study, like the informal urbanism of Lagos. But he has also been criticized for dropping in and looking for intelligence in disorder, aestheticizing a complex reality.

DSB Documenting "disorder" with an open mind is not exactly celebrating it. It's saying, "Is this really disorder? Let's look to understand it." A sociologist would ask, "Whose disorder?" I feel that being nonjudgmental, at first, is a very good idea. In the 1950s, we saw the human problems caused by architects, among others, making judgments too quickly. Holding back, not rushing to judgment doesn't mean you don't judge. It means you try to make sensitive judgments by learning about the thing you're judging—by asking, "Is this chaos an order we have not yet perceived?" Another question might be, "Can we ameliorate the problems of an area on its own terms, avoiding what's atrocious, but not losing what's good—and making sure we can tell the difference?"

These questions can take us from analysis to design. Researchers might ask them, or they might merely describe the conditions they see, and leave others to respond. They might apply the lessons to places other than where they were learned. So I'm not necessarily against merely searching. And aestheticizing, in the sense of abstracting this one variable for analysis, is approved scientific behavior. Criticism would be valid, however, if form-making were not combined with other criteria in synthesis—in design.

What are the political implications of looking at a place like Las Vegas or Lagos? When architects study a place do they tacitly legitimize or endorse it?

DSB We architects cannot, in the main, choose our clients. They choose us, though we have the right to refuse and do so at times, usually for pragmatic, not ideological, reasons. But now and then, a project seems evil and we reject it on moral grounds. Are Las Vegas and Lagos to be rejected on moral grounds? Are they "politically incorrect"? I believe we should be politically correct—when we can define what that is. But I feel our choice of Las Vegas had that moral quality. It no more signified approval of gambling than studying Chartres Cathedral would be an endorsement of the bloodier actions of medieval Christendom.

Many firms have adopted a design methodology where research is used to generate unexpected formal solutions. Their methods depart from the same place as *Learning from Las Vegas*, but always result in form.

DSB Although architects too often propose a building as the solution to all problems, it's not necessarily wrong to end up with a form. And whether form or function starts the process is not the issue either. Rather, the form should, in the end, take account of all requirements. At Penn's planning juries, Robert Mitchell, an architect turned planner, would criticize urban design students by saying, "You did a ritual dance called analysis. Then you closed that book and did whatever you wanted anyway." The idea is not to do that.

You decided to bring students' attention to Las Vegas for many reasons, some of which were personal, but the least of which was a desire to simply shock or provoke. Is there a danger of choosing research subjects for shock value, now that there is widespread acceptance for looking at the "wrong" thing?

DSB We did have personal reasons. When I was four, my grandparents brought toys home to Johannesburg for us from Coney Island, and, oh, was that exciting! My father had a great love for places like Miami Beach, Atlantic City, and Muizenberg, which is a South African equivalent. My parents went to Las Vegas in the 1940s and came back with family movies. So it's been a long thing with us.

We also had aesthetic reasons. We went because Pop Art was very exciting to us. This, together with a Brutalist interest in popular culture, African urban folk art, and English Pop Art of the 1940s and 1950s, led to our welcoming of American Pop Art, and inevitably to Las Vegas. And when we got there it was an amazing love-hate experience.

However—and this has been difficult for architects to understand—we went to Las Vegas largely for *social* reasons. My teachers in planning school were the trigger. They said, "You architects are too arrogant about the way people choose to live. A little humility would help. You should study the cities of the American southwest open-mindedly. Don't just condemn them as sprawl. Go find out why they are the way they are, and why people flock to them, and not to architect-designed places." That's basically why we went. We chose the Las Vegas Strip because it was an extreme version and, being in the desert, it was easier to study than a strip laid over the patterns of an older city.

And we *did* intend to be provocative. This was because, for Yalies in the 1960s, we knew the research subject had to be "agin' the government"—in

other words, iconoclastic—or they wouldn't have listened. But we had more down-to-earth reasons for going, too—getting architects to read, for one. I had learned from experience that the only way to entice architecture students into reading was to tie the material concretely to their design projects. The fact that they had to read in order to do their projects meant that they read. So our reading assignments were tuned to helping students pursue their research. But we hoped that, in the process, they would get grounding in subject matter we felt they needed in order to be sentient contributors within their profession. This applied, for example, in the "Learning from Levittown" studio, where we convinced architecture students to take on the difficult and opaque material of urban sociology.

RV "Learning from Levittown" was more shocking to people than *Learning from Las Vegas*. Vince Scully was horrified by it.

Why?

RV Because it was just too vulgar.

DSB While Yale students were studying Las Vegas, Cooper Union students were making careful analyses of Le Corbusier. This seemed to challenge Herbert Gans's thesis in *Popular Culture and High Culture* that professionals would emerge from within the various taste cultures to serve their own group's cultural needs. Yet a broader social reading might suggest that upper-middle-class Yalies were secure enough to analyze Las Vegas, while for their more upwardly-mobile colleagues it was too close to home.

One member of our Levittown studio had grown up in row housing in northeast Philadelphia. His environment, as much as mine in Africa, was under attack from upper-middle-class "oughts," and he was fascinated to question this mindset and view his home in a nonjudgmental way.

RV Was it the Levittown or the Las Vegas jury where a bunch of students from Columbia came up and heckled us?

DSB It was Levittown.

RV Bob Stern also came. He was a recent graduate then.

DSB He didn't heckle, but he was not in favor. He took Scully's view. I felt they were thinking, "Denise is leading Bob in the wrong direction."

What about the fact that the studio wasn't an obvious opportunity to design a building?

DSB Once, when I was planning an urban design studio, Penn's dean, Holmes Perkins, admonished me, "You're calling for too much analysis. The first love of these students is design. Don't take them too far away from it." So when we were first back from Las Vegas, I gave the students a brief sketch design to return them to what they loved. Well, they called it "that busywork Denise is getting us to do."

Is the research studio still valuable? Should there be a place in design schools for this kind of analytical design research?

DSB The research studio is very valuable. But it is easy to do badly, in which case it's worse than useless. And to do it well takes knowledge, coordination, and many hours of preparation. It's like the interdisciplinary studios that were tried in the 1960s. They got a bad reputation, not because they were a bad idea, but because architecture faculty didn't have the background to handle them and couldn't spend the preparation time needed to make them succeed.

In gauging the value of research studios, you should consider which aspect of them you're discussing. They're multifaceted and they don't resemble traditional architecture studios. They require collaborative work, with coordination between groups and organized sharing of information. Students typically work in pairs, research is formally organized and supervised, and separate tasks are assigned to individuals and groups. And the studio programs must be prepared beforehand and revised throughout the semester.

For these reasons, research studios faculty must be collaborators as well as instigators, and searchers as passionate as the students. As in the traditional studio, they should teach design as the coordination of the elements of architecture, but they can also help students understand professional action as a terrain that includes more than form-making, and see research as a lifelong activity that architects do in the responsible performance of their work. And they can nurture professional commitment through the passion for the problem and the camaraderie that a good research studio induces. So yes, I feel that most architects during their training should have one research studio, but few require more than one—not because “this isn’t architecture,” but because there is no time for more given the brevity of professional programs. A core purpose of studio in architecture should be to give students experience in coordinating the elements of architecture, and this skill, like riding a bicycle, is best learned by repeated practice over time. But the group research studio can be critical in helping students prepare for individual thesis-level work, as well as for the collaborations of professional practice; and its structured workbook can support its students’ future efforts as beginning architecture teachers.

Far from dropping the research studio, I feel architects should embrace it—carefully. We should institutionalize it but also limit its role in our pedagogy. And we should offer it to the wider university, because academic education could do with both an action-oriented model for its activist students and alternative pedagogies for its visual learners.

One theme we’ve noticed in researching this issue is the tension between taking time out of one’s career to travel and develop ideas, and the need to practice. It seems like architects today don’t have the time, literally and psychologically, to delay career-building for building an intellectual position.

RV That’s a good point. There’s a real tension there, and you have to compromise in some ways.

DSB Bob and I were lucky enough, after graduating, to spend time in study travel and work in Europe and elsewhere. And this was prolonged by our years of teaching. We’ve lived on the nurture and support from these experiences for more than forty years. We left teaching when we realized that our small, struggling practice needed our full attention, but in another sense we have never left. Despite being in practice, we’ve had a life of searching that started when we were students and continues today.

Much as I loved teaching, I have found the intertwined variables of practice, and seeing the physical results of my own conceptual thought, even more enchanting—to the point of addiction. Yet I feel lucky that we have been able to run a “mini-university” alongside our professional life. This means our work is a troika: we oscillate between looking-studying, designing, and theorizing-writing. And we keep up our travel for study and work. There can be no better way to see a foreign country than through working there. It’s so much more rewarding than being a tourist. In short order, you’re on close terms with strangers, sharing their efforts even when you don’t share their language, and at work on things in life most meaningful to them and you. The cross-cultural and historical research and design we could do in building for Toulouse, France, and Nikko, Japan, were, to us, some of the great opportunities of our careers.