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Robert Venturi and Indiana Jones: enduring American principles

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Introduction

Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), the first of the Indiana Jones trilogy, introduces Indiana Jones in two contradictory roles, that of jungle adventurer on the one hand, and as rather bashful Dr Jones, wearing sober tweeds, lecturing in the gothic pile of a university on the other.

Some men from the government pay Dr Jones a visit, explaining that a certain Professor Ravenwood of the University of Chicago may be involved in a dastardly plot helping the Nazis to acquire the Lost Ark of the Covenant, with the original tablets of stone, those original enduring principles. Enthusiastic to foil the enemy, Indy sets off by flying boat across the Pacific to a mountain village in Nepal to find a girl who owns a bar, who has acquired some precious clue to the whereabouts of the ark from her father. In a ruckus with the enemy also in pursuit of the relic, the bar burns down, and the girl joins Indy on their adventure to find that eternal truth. A truth which, of course, if you remember the ending, you should never see. For if you should look directly into the ark's secrets, consumed by wonder, you will be destroyed by forces beyond your understanding.

When Indy and the girl return to the USA with the covenant, the crate containing the ark is anonymously placed somewhere in the vaults of the Smithsonian, secure, and never to be opened to the US public.

A rather priceless allegory of our own search for enduring principles perhaps, but one I use here to

discuss the architectural thinking of Robert Venturi, habitué of Philadelphia, scholar from Princeton, who shares something in common with this Indiana Jones, in background, in attitude, in philosophy, in relationships, and in his attitude to history. They are particularly American attitudes. Tom Wolfe would lampoon East Coast intellectual architects in 'From Bauhaus to Our House', for their European, or rather 'un-American' sophistication. From this damnation, the 'grey', 'scholastic' Robert Venturi seemed to escape, maintaining his own sense of immigrant outsider, a man who felt the conspicuous enthusiasm of the tourist, 'walking on air' as he travelled through Europe, but a man who adventured west in the end, to wild Las Vegas, in search of America. As Aldo Rossi puts it: 'I believe that America has a capacity to understand, a kind of innocence, that old Europe does not know, I would say that his (Venturi's) mother's house contains a kind of innocence.' (Preface to 'Mother's House'.)

Of course Indiana Jones is a fictional character, an invention of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas on a beach in Hawaii. My own enjoyment of Steven Spielberg's popular hero conjured this title as I sat one Sunday morning, with one eye watching Indy teaching at the university, dressed in tweed, tie and jumper, fumbling with his spelling and bashful when he spots that one of his attractive lady students has written 'I love you' on her eyelids to flash at him during lectures, while with the other I tried to correct a paper on the architecture of commercial signs. The video image struck me

exactly as that of the friendly Robert Venturi, wearing so similar a uniform, teaching at Yale, explaining his adventures on the western consumerist frontier, in the twentieth century Sodom and Gomorrah of Las Vegas.

The anatomy of an adventure hero

I am enthralled by Spielberg's down-at-home folksiness, his control of the action, his cavalier love of film history, even his conservatism. In particular Spielberg is master of the adventure genre, a tradition which could include subjects as diverse as King Arthur's Knights, or Dan Dare's Incredible Journeys, or Xena the Warrior Princess, alongside Indiana Jones.

Genre stories are both enduring *and* circumstantially particular. While there are clearly archetypes for the Indiana Jones adventure (Rider Haggard, James Bond, or Humphrey Bogart in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*), there are also highly circumstantial components relating to particular audiences and the context of other films of the time (*Star Wars*), or to translate into architectural jargon: *Context changes the meaning of form* (Venturi via Moos), exactly how Venturi introduced his Masters Project at Princeton.

Venturi's two classic publications, *Complexity and Contradiction* in 1966 and *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972, as well as a crop of influential buildings (not least his mother's house) play pretty much fast and loose with archetypes. On the one hand Venturi reassures us with his love and knowledge of architecture's history, on the other he recognises that now is the moment for its consumption. Are there enduring principles? – well *sort of*, or rather,

to steal a favourite line from *The Great Escape* . . . 'Don't ask!' Architecture exists as a series of historical figures to be played with, inspiring new adventures on the architect's drawing board, *independent* of the material conditions that created them.

Venturi deals largely with the world of appearances rather than essences. This historical understanding encourages a kind of parallel universe; or history as *back to the future*. Time travellers by necessity occupy some parallel universe, and within this universe Steven Spielberg rakes history for good ideas, from Indiana Jones to Oskar Schindler, to reanimate the past.

If there is a philosophy to accompany all this, it is what Stanislaus von Moos calls a 'philosophy of common sense'. It is a philosophy consolidated in several traditions, in that of David Hume's empiricism, bluntly, that truth is ratified by the man on the street. Moos illustrates this with the exotic fable of a maiden's sarcophagus in a purpose-built mosque, a fable which demonstrates that it is the most sacred thing (the maiden's body) which must be removed from the mosque in order for it to be up to the task of her commemoration. All else guarantees disappointment. The contents of the Ark must remain hidden, the eyes shut, just as it is in that most precious and time-consuming element of an architectural plan, the 'Big Idea' that needs to be finally removed.

Meanwhile there is a social imperative, the recognition of a democratising tradition, as from great houses and villas come the 'democratic' hotels of the Las Vegas Strip. There are nods to Kenneth Burke, Cleanth Brookes and contempo-

rary, pragmatic urban psychologists – Melvin Weber and Herbert Gans, and behind any exuberance lies a strong moral sense, the battle of good against evil as espoused by modest, hard working (in Venturi's case, Quaker) parents. Venturi's mother demanded the mother's house be 'unpretentious', and resented her marble floor.

Finally there is a love of ambiguity, as illustrated in Venturi's respect for William Empson and T.S. Eliot, where poetry is enjoyed in precisely those terms which acknowledge its limitations.

Truth is stranger than fiction

Venturi's adventure begins, just like Indy's, during the Second World War: Princeton, Venturi's choice of school, boasted a real Indiana Jones figure, Howard Crosby Butler. Butler was an explorer, archaeologist and charismatic director of the architecture school until his death in 1924, and a lasting influence thereafter (Venturi studied 1944–7). Butler was dubbed Princeton's T.E. Lawrence, excavating archaeological sites from the Sahara to Scotland. For 50 years the 'Princeton System' combined archaeology, art history and architectural studies in one, and for 50 years Princeton hired no single dominant stylistic leader, encouraging a plurality of vision.

Within this tradition there are mentor figures, not stylistic gurus. Jones has Professor Havenhurst, a mentor with whom there was a mysterious falling out; Venturi has Louis Kahn, the man who bestowed on him the Rome Prize, and employed him for a traumatic nine weeks in his office. Venturi is haunted by Kahn, just as Wright was haunted by Sullivan. The relation between master and

apprentice is one full of tension in the rapidly changing new world. Meanwhile old world masters, such as Le Corbusier, can always be counted on to turn up at the wrong moment, and domestic rivals are singled out, John Huston style, as renegade siblings, either by their embracing of a corrupt establishment (like Philip Johnson), or by overdoing their own sense of the hard-done-by (like Paul Rudolf).

While writing *Complexity and Contradiction*, Venturi was described as a 'lonely bachelor' by college friend Philip Finlelpearl, obsessive in his studies, burning the midnight oil. Venturi met Denise Scott Brown, a free spirit with a footloose background in South Africa, London and Los Angeles, not exactly in a bar in Nepal, but in the Yale planning school. They were married in 1967, and the newly weds, in a heady mixture of romance and opportunity, set off for Las Vegas with a gaggle of graduate students in 1968.

The Aladdin and Caesar's Palace were the latest additions to a vibrant Strip when Venturi arrived. Caesar's Palace, with its theme of Imperial Rome, suited Venturi. The Italian capital had been the focus of *Complexity and Contradiction*. The locals were more suspicious: 'Yale professor will praise Strip for (whatever thousand) dollars' rang the headline in *The Las Vegas Sun*.

Remorseless in its academic style, *Complexity and Contradiction's* argument had been fundamentally liberal, dealing largely with the world of appearances (rather than essences), and hardly with material history. Michelangelo and Louis Sullivan are both seen as agreeably complex and contradictory architects, in fact, 'almost identical', in their

arrangement of elevation. This is a quality noted by Stanislaus von Moos,¹ when looking back at Venturi's earliest excursions into theory, where in defending his masters project his first line 'considers the art of the environment; the problem of the whole environment *as perceived by the eye*' (*von Moos emphasis*). Establishing the lens through which to view complexity and contradiction (usually the plan, section and elevation of single buildings) avoided an obvious pitfall, that in the wider context, complexity and contradiction are ubiquitous.

Learning from Las Vegas, the outcome of the trip, wryly peddled Las Vegas to the American architectural establishment as the contemporary equivalent of Rome. Tom Wolfe had already compared Las Vegas to Versailles. Thus, the city began to represent the more libertarian aspects of the American experience by means of epic comparison. Fuelled on both POP and academic sensibilities, the snapshot of The Strip for ten days in the fall of 1968, coupled with the work completed over ten weeks back at Yale, reveals an interesting choice of method and comparative example.

Almost half *Learning from Las Vegas* was devoted to 'Some Definitions Using The Comparative Method' promoting the 'ugly and ordinary' architecture of Venturi Rauch Scott Brown in a radical stance to promote 'main street' as 'almost alright'. But the Las Vegas Strip is hardly main street. And in turn, *Learning From Las Vegas* was hardly about Las Vegas at all.

The comparative method is daring, for it forces Venturi to pick out his enemy, in this case, his ballsy sibling, Paul Rudolf, in whose 'Art and

Architecture' building Venturi suffered at Yale. In particular there is a dramatic comparison made between Venturi's own 'Guild House' old people's home in Philadelphia (1960–63) and Paul Rudolf's 'Crawford Manor' old people's home in New Haven (1962–66). This involves some memorable fisticuffs. Venturi draws the distinction between an architectural 'Duck' and 'Decorated shed'. This is less clear today than it might have been in 1968. At the time it was clear to Venturi that Rudolf, and the majority of the profession, were designing egocentric 'ducks' (a term which represented a visual, verbal and intellectual insult) while his company did 'decorated sheds', whose apotheosis he saw in the Las Vegas casinos, which demonstrated wit and a 'rich tradition'. His competitors exhibit an overweening sense of their own importance, being self indulgent and heroic with their ducks, while Venturi prefers nimbleness of brain to machismo. It was a killer blow to compare their high art architecture with the basest commercial roadside attraction within the vocabulary of POP, the large Long Island Duckling that sold ducks.

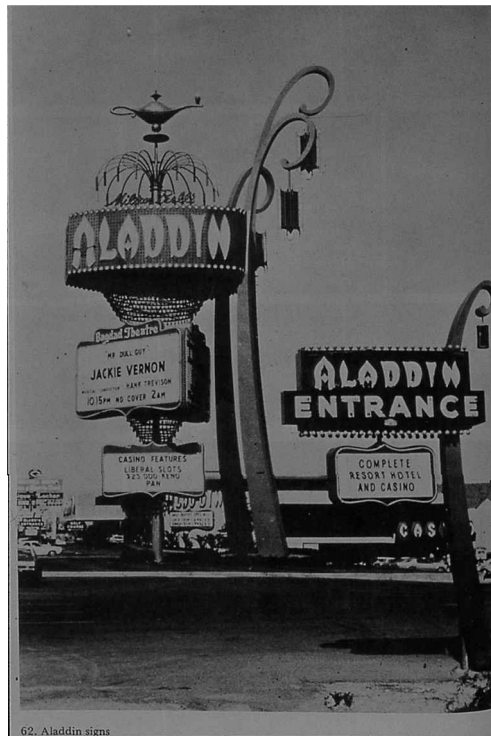
Instead, The Decorated Shed was to become the exemplar of complexity and contradiction. Where better to find the decorated sheds than Las Vegas. (We should remember that Venturi's own decorated sheds might appear a little dull, but at least, in a manner of speaking, they were dull in an interesting way.) The commercial signs and hullabaloo of the Strip somehow found accommodation within Venturi's *abiding synthesis* (as opposed to enduring principle). Here Venturi would enjoy all sorts of contradictions, for instance enjoying the vital and commercial (recognising its underlying

order as abundantly clear) and at the same time warning that 'our architecture must survive the cigarette machine' (that such clarity might be threatened by chaos).

In the architecture of the Aladdin and Caesar's Palace could be read the juxtaposition of straight-forward modern forms with arabesques of antique appliqué. The Sands found itself with a conservative round tower dressed with elaborate vaulting and balconies at its head; the Aladdin, a shining mirror glass box with arabesque appliqué for mullions wrapping themselves in a vaulted colonnade 16 stories up at the parapet; Caesar's was smooth modern curves dressed in perforated blockwork, giving the appearance of a tiffany lamp draped in chiffon (Fig.1).

But Venturi's reading is at some odds with the material realities of life for the architect on the Las Vegas Strip. The Sands, whose upper balconies for Venturi represented a pleasingly risqué flourish above a modern tower, were in fact, for architect Martin Stern Jr, a hard cash investment as he paid for them himself, on the basis he took a percentage of the room rate on each one, gambling on human nature (or maybe just the Freudian unconscious) over any abstract duality.

But the explicit commercialism of Las Vegas, and its decadent reputation, vexed the team. Comparing Las Vegas to Rome was achieved outside the obvious allusions to decadence and ruin. Juvenal's elegant satires could apply as much to Caesar's Palace as to the fall of ancient Rome, aspects self consciously exploited by Las Vegas hosts. Included in *Learning From Las Vegas* is the Caesar's Palace advertisement whose by-line 'toga



62. Aladdin signs

Figure 1.

clad attendants eagerly await your every summons', was literal. Caesar's Palace was not dissected for its inspired evocation of decadent Rome. Venturi excised all such material from his study, noting:

Just as the analysis of the structure of a Gothic cathedral need not include the morality of medieval religion, so Las Vegas values are not questioned here. The morality of commercial advertising, gambling interests, and the competitive instinct is not at issue here,

although. . . we believe it should be in the architect's broader *synthetic* tasks.²

These are not 'real' archaeologists; the way of life of Las Vegas residents is not the object of their excavations. Meanwhile one might expect, from opening examples quoted in *Complexity and Contradiction* (the baroque architecture of Bernini and Borromini and Vanbrugh) or even Tom Wolfe's comparison of Las Vegas to Versailles, that any comparison with Rome would involve the Baroque: the first overtly politically sanctioned popular art, smothered in lush iconography to raise the pulse of even the most somnambulant congregation. But the analogy with the Gothic Cathedral exaggerated the formal and upright qualities of their analysis, their own moral standing.

Truth was stranger than Venturi's fiction, even if it made such seamless and entertaining sense. You cannot have one hand clapping, they said, you need an action-packed script; you need Both/And Architecture, Order and Chaos, Yale University and the Las Vegas strip, Catholic and Protestant, Cavalier and Quaker, baroque and gothic, East Coast and West Coast, high culture and low culture, ancient and modern, men and women, Indiana Jones and Dr Jones, and you need a charming storyboard.

Postscript

Despondency with the apparent failure of the liberal centre to hold in the face of hard nosed commercialism led Venturi to attack today's Las Vegas Boulevard on a recent visit. It seemed that the ordered chaos of commercialism had given way to bland sophistication. The Strip has indeed

become tasteful in all but the activities that go on there. It has left behind the gestural vitality of Vaughan Cannon's Young Electric Sign Company, in the Boneyard.

Venturi bemoans the new Las Vegas for having departed from his complex and contradictory script: In *Learning from Las Vegas* we described our personal paths, geographic and cultural, that went from Rome to Las Vegas. Would an analysis of our recent journey from The Las Vegas Strip to Las Vegas Boulevard prove as instructive as the first for architecture?³

Well, Indiana Jones cannot continue with his adventures forever, and must sooner or later hang up his bull whip, sit down comfortably with memories of former glories.

The sign for the 'Tally Ho' ('Stylish Nude Entertainment') off Industrial Boulevard LV has a strange name and a strange form (Fig.2). This 'Unique Gentleman's Cabaret Featuring Foxy Frolicking Fillies' features a large heraldic symbol at its base in the form of a very large European Soccer trophy, above which the main section is decorated with the ace of spades motif. Above sits a lamp with two dancing figures. They are not facing the direction of oncoming traffic.

The design is a splendid enough example of ordered chaos, but under which rules?

New resorts do not feature exuberant flashing signs. They may have enormous bland structures functioning as signs. The sign for Bellagio must be eight stories high, in creme, a monumental lollipop, and there are plenty of titanic colossi; big Harley Davidsons, Fender Stratocasters, and CocaCola bottles. Big business means big object; replacing



Figure 2.

will be tempted up the Strip in a procession, savouring custom spectacles along the way, one giant show, a city of acts rather than signs. NYNY has made sure that the action stays inside, with little vaudeville performances played out across the interior; the intimacy of their living signs assures a better return than the freebie blockbusting show on the Strip.

In the nearest thing to a civic museum Las Vegas has, the Boneyard, lies one of Aladdin's many lamps (you can spot one lying there in *Mars Attacks!*) but the final version of the Aladdin sign (1997) shows none of the nervous energy of the 1968 'original', being merely a huge billboard surmounted by a residual lamp. Across its breadth hang the letters of its sublime yet doomladen final attraction – the Las Vegas debut of the Bolshoi Ballet, looking highly reminiscent of those collages included in *Learning From Las Vegas* depicting billboards on the Pantheon in Rome, but deliciously in reverse.

The complex and contradictory Bolshoi show was a massive flop, and the Aladdin closed soon after, at least illustrating one, enduring, Las Vegas principle.

Notes and references

1. Stanislaus von Moos, *Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown; Buildings and Projects* (Rizzoli, New York) 1987.
2. *Learning From Las Vegas*, p. 7.
3. Robert Venturi in 1994. Published in *Iconography and Electronics upon a generic architecture; a view from the drafting room* (MIT, 1996).

the huge golden lion that fronted MGM Grand is the world's largest bronze statue of a lion. Going in between the paws of a big lion was bad karma for some of Las Vegas' most superstitious high rollers.

At the other end of the spectrum signs have disappeared. NYNY doesn't need one because it is one; The Venetian doesn't need a showstopping extravaganza every hour because it stands opposite one, and hence offers the best view. Customers