

The Artist and the Architect



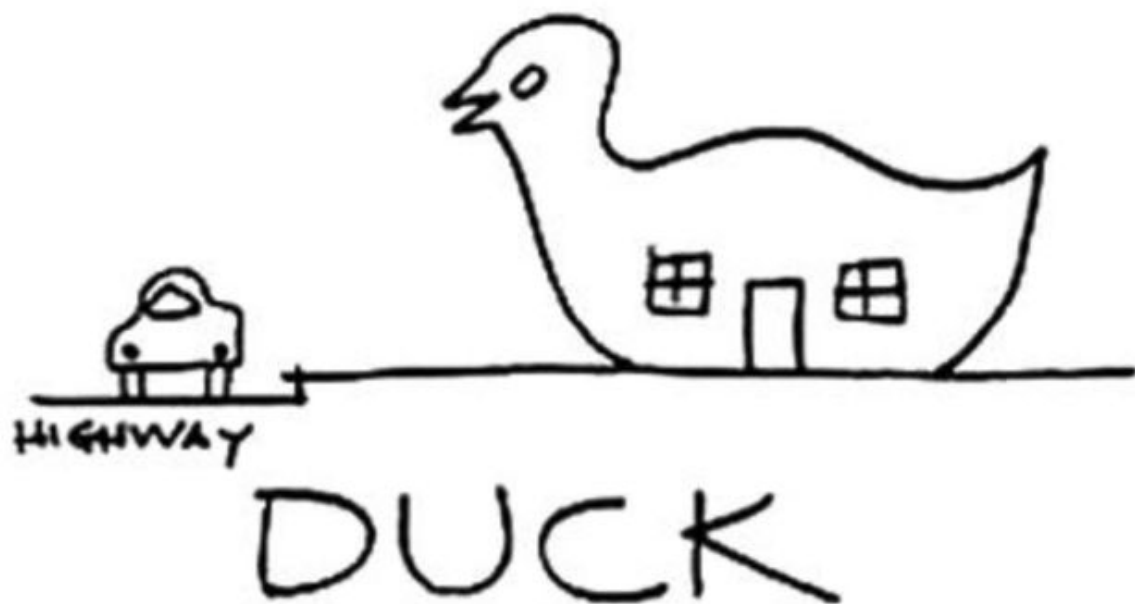
by Alberto Goglio

What is the relationship between art and architecture today? Or rather, what is the state of the relationship – if it still exists – between the artist and the architect? When, in the early 1970s, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, together with Steven Izenour, published *Learning from Las Vegas* [1], in a context that at the time seemed dominated by the exhausted repetition of the rigid formal protocols that the International Style had borrowed from the pioneers of rationalism, their primary intention was not so much to promote the anti-architectural aesthetic of America's gambling capital as it was to emphasize the importance of the symbolic dimension in architecture. The subtitle, added in the second edition of the book, is explicit: *The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*.

The authors' thesis is that architecture, having exhausted the innovative drive of the Modernist movement, needed to recover and highlight its symbolic dimension and critically reconsider the function of ornament, precisely because, in their view, that dimension finds its fullest expression in ornament. So far, so simple. But, as is often the case with hugely successful books, this essay, too, may be cited superficially, if not entirely out of context. Let us, then, look beyond the slogans. In *Learning from Las Vegas*, Venturi and Scott Brown draw a distinction between symbolic ornament and expressive ornament – that is, between denotation and connotation: "Denotation indicates specific meanings; connotation suggests general meanings. [...] Generally, to the extent that it is denotative in its meaning, an element depends on its heraldic characteristics; to the extent that it is

connotative, an element depends on its physiognomic qualities” [2]. According to Venturi and Scott Brown, modern architecture has impoverished itself “by rejecting denotative ornament and the rich tradition of iconography in historical architecture, and by ignoring – or rather using unawares – the connotative expression it substituted for decoration” [3].

The result of this shift is the promotion of expressionism at the expense of symbolism. That is, of architectural articulation, or form, over meaning. A significant aspect of Venturi and Scott Brown’s critique of functionalism and its followers is that, in their attempt to equate architectural quality with form and space, modern architects have arbitrarily reinterpreted the architecture of the past from a formalist perspective, ignoring the symbolic heritage that, in their view, represents its true richness: “The iconographic forms and trappings of medieval and Renaissance architecture were reduced to polychromatic texture at the service of space; the symbolic complexities and contradictions of Mannerist architecture were appreciated for their formal complexities and contradictions; Neoclassical architecture was liked not for its Romantic use of association, but for its formal simplicity” [4].



The two illustrations exemplifying the duck and decorated shed types in "Learning from Las Vegas".

At the heart of this critique lies the contrast between two models: on the one hand, the "sculptural building", which subordinates the entire design program to a single form; this model is ironically dubbed the "duck", taking its cue from the entrance to a drive-in on Long Island. On the other hand, there is a building that the authors call a "decorated shed" in which a

simple structure that meets functional needs is overlaid with decoration that is entirely independent of it. The metaphor of the duck is highly significant because it brings the plastic expression back into the symbolic dimension, denying it the possibility of establishing itself as a purely formal entity: "The duck is the special building that *is* a symbol; the decorated shed is the conventional shelter that *applies* symbols" [5]. Through the rejection of the historical ornamental apparatus of nineteenth-century eclecticism, therefore, the architecture of the Modern Movement believed it had emancipated itself from the symbol, but "while rejecting explicit symbolism and frivolous appliqué ornament, has distorted the entire building into one big ornament" [6]. To put it another way, much like the Long Island duck, "when Modern architects righteously abandoned ornament on buildings, they unconsciously designed buildings that *were* ornament" [7].

The path outlined in *Learning from Las Vegas* is the recovery of the symbolic and narrative richness that characterized the architecture of the past, brought up to date through the potential offered by modern technology. Venturi and Scott Brown, noting that "the relevant revolution today is the current electronic one" [8], envision a use of technology that is neither an end in itself nor reduced solely to commercial needs, but one capable of generating narratives and meanings of broader scope: "Architecturally, the symbol systems that electronics purveys so well are more important than its engineering content. The most urgent technological problem facing us is the humane meshing of advanced scientific and technical systems with our imperfect and exploited human systems" [9]. However, this narrative dimension, like the conceptual dimension, historically belongs to the realm of decoration and is therefore the domain of the artist. This is why, in general, they are approached with understandable reluctance by architects, despite the fact that today's technology vastly expands the range of expressive possibilities and has apparently diminished the importance of the specific technical skills that, until a not-too-distant past, characterized architectural decoration, thus potentially rendering superfluous the presence of a professional figure specialized in generating images and meanings.

Indeed, modern and contemporary artistic research provides a boundless repertoire of experiences to refer to, which sees the artist's work limited to the design part alone. This primacy of the project with respect to the technical-artisanal dimension opens up new potential spaces for action in the field of decoration for the architect. But is a less simple crossing than it seems. As we have already said, in affirming the need for a rediscovery of the symbolic sphere in architecture, Venturi and Scott Brown emphasize the removal, by the protagonists of the modern season, of the heritage of symbols and decorations of the architecture of previous centuries. For the authors, recognizing this heritage would instead constitute the premise for an architecture that, using the communicative modalities of pop culture up to

the paradigm of anti-architectural vulgarity represented by Las Vegas, expresses high meanings: “understanding the content of Pop’s messages and the way that it is projected does not mean that one need agree with, approve of, or reproduce that content” [10].



Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, Hôtel du Conseil départemental de la Haute-Garonne, 1999, Toulouse.

However, in their analysis, Venturi and Scott Brown in turn operate a removal, anchoring the relationship between art and architecture to the ways in which it expressed itself in a privileged way in the twentieth century, that is, in the appropriation and reworking by architecture of the formal research of the artistic avant-garde: “Just as Liechtenstein has borrowed the techniques and images of the comics to convey satire, sorrow, and irony rather than violent high adventure, so may the architect’s high reader suggest sorrow, irony, love, the human condition, happiness, or merely the purpose within, rather than the necessity to buy soap or the possibility of an orgy” [11]. Here’s the thing. If we pursue the aim of defining a narrative superstructure that overlaps with the building’s tectonics, in continuity with a tradition that rationalist architecture has claimed to eliminate, compressing the artist’s space to experimentation alone, entrusting the architect with the task of being, in the most complete sense of the term, a

decorator represents a contradiction. In other words, the high reader cannot be “of the architect”, but of the artist. Léger’s warning regarding the exclusion of the artist from the “implied pact” with the architect and the wall comes to mind [12]. A justified exclusion if it is a question of “distributing color”, especially if this is replaced by the intrinsic chromatic qualities of the material-coating, but which becomes problematic when it comes to communicating through symbols and meanings.

Perhaps this is why, in Las Vegas, the generation of architects who referred to Venturi and Scott Brown’s essay to free themselves from functionalist mannerism, grasped only the aspects most closely linked to the architectural lexicon (re-exhuming classical ornament in a more or less *kitsch* key) and carefully avoided straying into the treacherous terrain of the actual narrative. Certainly this is why Venturi and Scott Brown, to exemplify their theories, abstractly engage in a building for which a virtually unlimited repertoire of modern heroic and celebratory images is available. This is the American Football Hall of Fame, whose project was included as an example in the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, in a section dedicated to their work, then eliminated in subsequent editions of the book [13]. What happened in the meantime? Architecture at the turn of the 20th and early 21st centuries gave us many spectacular duck-buildings and several Buildingboards [14]. Fortunately, there are also many quality architectures that have found their *raison d’être* in their relationship with pre-existing structures and the context in which they were inserted. We can consider the latter as the conscious heirs of a tradition that has generated the great beauty of historic cities, made not only by great monuments, but also and above all by coherent urban textures and harmonious stratifications.



Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, TEA (Tenerife Espacio de las Artes), 2008, Tenerife, view from Avenida de San Sebastián (Koppchen/Wikimedia).

Precisely because they follow in the footsteps of this legacy, they legitimately express themselves outside the possible relationship between artist and architect. What about ducks and monumental tech sheds? The first are the extreme, plastic manifestation of the expressive self-sufficiency of the formalist architect who, as we have said, uses artistic research as a repertoire to draw on. It finds, almost by reaction, a counterpoint in art that deals with urban space, polemically equally self-sufficient in its relationship with the city and its inhabitants, without seeking the mediation of architecture. As for the decorated sheds, with some exceptions, first and foremost the ten-year collaboration between the photographer Thomas Ruff and the architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre De Meuron [15], at the moment they mostly represent a missed opportunity. Probably, if they are imprisoned in a purely commercial logic, with all due respect to Venturi and Scott Brown, the reason lies precisely in the failure to re-propose in a contemporary key the centuries-old partnership between artist and architect.

[1] R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1972.

[2,3] *Ibidem*, p. 101.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 129.

□5□ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

□6□ *Ibidem*, p. 103.

□7□ *Ibidem*, p. 163.

□8,9□ *Ibidem*, p. 151.

□10□ *Ibidem*, pp. 161-162.

□11□ *Ibidem*, p. 162.

□12□ In his *Address to Architects* delivered on the occasion of the Fourth International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM), held in 1933 in Athens, painter Fernand Léger, one of the key figures in the debate on the interaction between art and architecture in the twentieth century, writes: "You have wanted to dispense color yourselves. Allow me to tell you that in an era like ours when everything is specialized, that is a mistake on your part. The carpenter does not make wrought iron, that I know. What right have you to dispense color? The era of the specialist condemns you. The contract among the three of us, the wall, you, and me, must be adhered to. Why have you broken it? I am not angry, and I am waiting. I think the event is going to happen and that, arm-in-arm, the wall, you, and I, we will achieve the great modern works that are to be done". In the same year, Léger, in a conference held in Zurich, entitled *The Wall, the Architect, the Painter*, will enunciate the same concepts. This last text is included in the collection of writings of F. Léger, *Functions of Painting*, The Viking Press, New York 1965, pp. 91-99.

□13□ With an effective play on words, the authors define this type of architecture as "buildingboard", from the union of "building" and "billboard". The theory of the decorated shed finds its most literal application in this example: a relatively simple container is superimposed by a large screen-facade, which completely masks the structure and dimensions of the building. This screen, built with technology similar to that of television screens inside stadiums, features footage and images of football champions, with the aim of celebrating the sport's modern heroes.

□14□ Meanwhile, Las Vegas has also changed. As if he had identified in Venturi and Scott Brown's prophecies the danger of seeing his consumer aesthetic elevated to the rank of elite cultural model, he upped the ante (who better than Las Vegas could do that?) with imaginative and tacky reconstructions of Venice or the Eiffel Tower.

□15□ The best-known fruits of this collaboration are Ricola-Europe SA,

Production and Storage Building in Mulhouse, France (1993), Eberswalde Technical School Library in Eberswalde, Germany (1999) and TEA (Tenerife Espacio de las Artes) in Tenerife, Spain (2008).

Homepage: Young James Rosenquist with his mother, Ruth Hendrickson, in front of the first large "billboard" he painted, in a photo taken in Minneapolis in 1954 (courtesy Acquavella Galleries).

Below: Front cover and dust jacket of the original U.S. edition of "Learning from Las Vegas," MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1972, designed by Muriel Cooper (www.graphicarts.princeton.edu).

