

**LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS:
THE FORGOTTEN SYMBOLISM
OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM**

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TO ROBERT SCOTT BROWN, 1931-1959

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PART I
A SIGNIFICANCE FOR
A&P PARKING LOTS,
OR LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS

§ A SIGNIFICANCE FOR A&P PARKING LOTS, OR LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS

*"Substance for a writer consists not merely of those realities he thinks he discovers; it consists even more of those realities which have been made available to him by the literature and idioms of his own day and by the images that still have vitality in the literature of the past. Stylistically, a writer can express his feeling about this substance either by imitation, if it sits well with him, or by parody, if it doesn't."*¹

Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things.

The commercial strip, the Las Vegas Strip in particular—the example par excellence (Figs. 1 and 2)—challenges the architect to take a positive, non-chip-on-the-shoulder view. Architects are out of the habit of looking nonjudgmentally at the environment, because orthodox Modern architecture is progressive, if not revolutionary, utopian, and puristic; it is dissatisfied with *existing* conditions. Modern architecture has been anything but permissive: Architects have preferred to change the existing environment rather than enhance what is there.

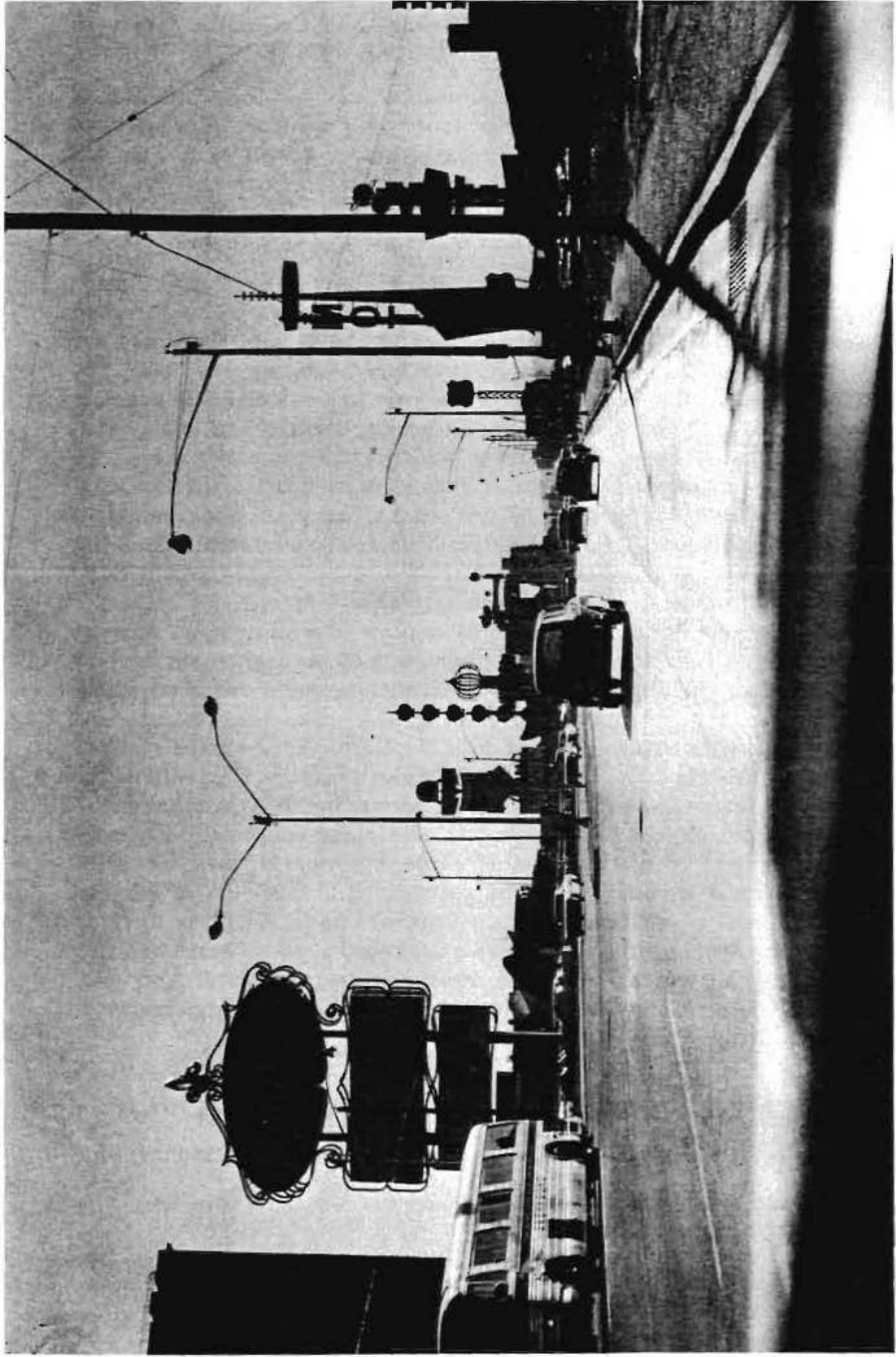
But to gain insight from the commonplace is nothing new: Fine art often follows folk art. Romantic architects of the eighteenth century discovered an existing and conventional rustic architecture. Early Modern architects appropriated an existing and conventional industrial vocabulary without much adaptation. Le Corbusier loved grain elevators and steamships; the Bauhaus looked like a factory; Mies refined the details of American steel factories for concrete buildings. Modern architects work through analogy, symbol, and image—although they have gone to lengths to disclaim almost all determinants of their forms except structural necessity and the program—and they derive insights, analogies, and stimulation from unexpected images. There is a perversity in the learning process: We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward. And withholding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything.

§ COMMERCIAL VALUES AND COMMERCIAL METHODS

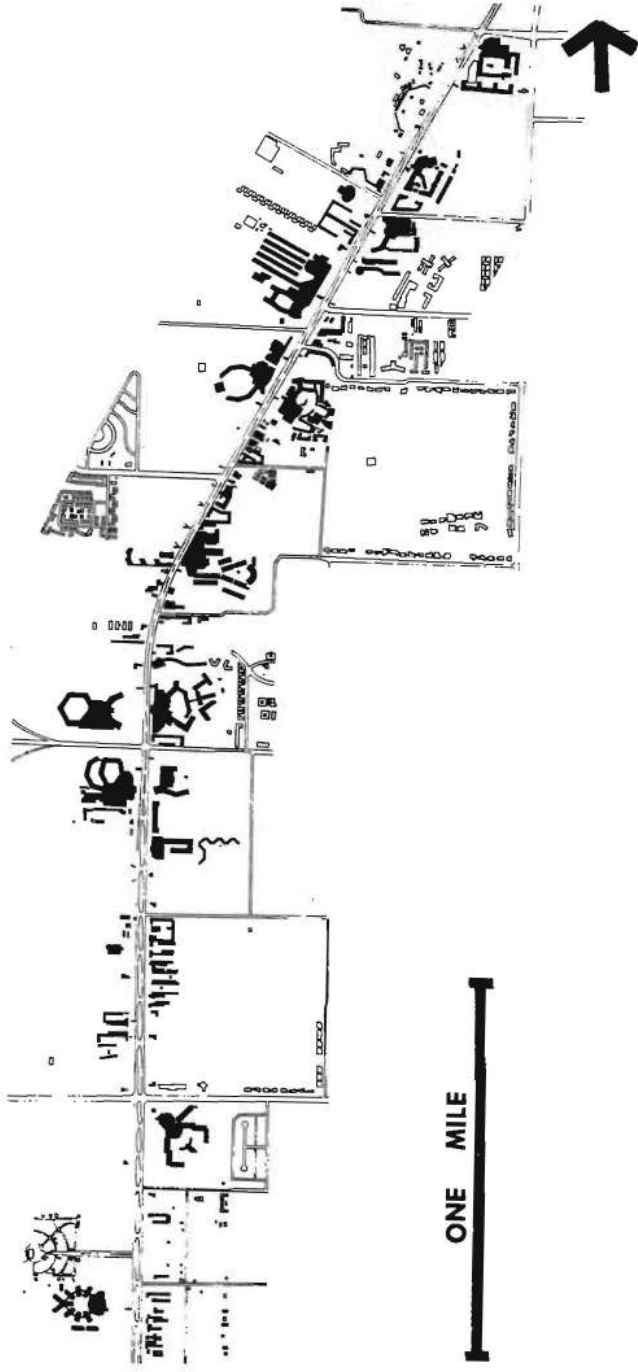
Las Vegas is analyzed here only as a phenomenon of architectural

§ See material under the corresponding heading in the Studio Notes section following Part I.

1. Richard Poirier, "T. S. Eliot and the Literature of Waste," *The New Republic* (May 20, 1967), p. 21.



1. The Las Vegas Strip, looking southwest



2. Map of Las Vegas Strip

communication. Just as an analysis of the structure of a Gothic cathedral need not include a debate on the morality of medieval religion, so Las Vegas's values are not questioned here. The morality of commercial advertising, gambling interests, and the competitive instinct is not at issue here, although, indeed, we believe it should be in the architect's broader, *synthetic* tasks of which an analysis such as this is but one aspect. The analysis of a drive-in church in this context would match that of a drive-in restaurant, because this is a study of method, not content. Analysis of one of the architectural variables in isolation from the others is a respectable scientific and humanistic activity, so long as all are resynthesized in design. Analysis of existing American urbanism is a socially desirable activity to the extent that it teaches us architects to be more understanding and less authoritarian in the plans we make for both inner-city renewal and new development. In addition, there is no reason why the methods of commercial persuasion and the skyline of signs analyzed here should not serve the purpose of civic and cultural enhancement. But this is not entirely up to the architect.

BILLBOARDS ARE ALMOST ALL RIGHT

Architects who can accept the lessons of primitive vernacular architecture, so easy to take in an exhibit like "Architecture without Architects," and of industrial, vernacular architecture, so easy to adapt to an electronic and space vernacular as elaborate neo-Brutalist or neo-Constructivist megastructures, do not easily acknowledge the validity of the commercial vernacular. For the artist, creating the new may mean choosing the old or the existing. Pop artists have relearned this. Our acknowledgment of existing, commercial architecture at the scale of the highway is within this tradition.

Modern architecture has not so much excluded the commercial vernacular as it has tried to take it over by inventing and enforcing a vernacular of its own, improved and universal. It has rejected the combination of fine art and crude art. The Italian landscape has always harmonized the vulgar and the Vitruvian: the *contorni* around the *duomo*, the *portiere's* laundry across the *padrone's portone*, *Supercortemaggiore* against the Romanesque apse. Naked children have never played in our fountains, and I. M. Pei will never be happy on Route 66.

ARCHITECTURE AS SPACE

Architects have been bewitched by a single element of the Italian landscape: the piazza. Its traditional, pedestrian-scaled, and intricately enclosed space is easier to like than the spatial sprawl of Route 66 and

Los Angeles. Architects have been brought up on Space, and enclosed space is the easiest to handle. During the last 40 years, theorists of Modern architecture (Wright and Le Corbusier sometimes excepted) have focused on space as the essential ingredient that separates architecture from painting, sculpture, and literature. Their definitions glory in the uniqueness of the medium; although sculpture and painting may sometimes be allowed spatial characteristics, sculptural or pictorial architecture is unacceptable—because Space is sacred.

Purist architecture was partly a reaction against nineteenth-century eclecticism. Gothic churches, Renaissance banks, and Jacobean manors were frankly picturesque. The mixing of styles meant the mixing of media. Dressed in historical styles, buildings evoked explicit associations and romantic allusions to the past to convey literary, ecclesiastical, national, or programmatic symbolism. Definitions of architecture as space and form at the service of program and structure were not enough. The overlapping of disciplines may have diluted the architecture, but it enriched the meaning.

Modern architects abandoned a tradition of iconology in which painting, sculpture, and graphics were combined with architecture. The delicate hieroglyphics on a bold pylon, the archetypal inscriptions of a Roman architrave, the mosaic processions in Sant'Apollinare, the ubiquitous tattoos over a Giotto Chapel, the enshrined hierarchies around a Gothic portal, even the illusionistic frescoes in a Venetian villa, all contain messages beyond their ornamental contribution to architectural space. The integration of the arts in Modern architecture has always been called a good thing. But one did not paint *on* Mies. Painted panels were floated independently of the structure by means of shadow joints; sculpture was in or near but seldom on the building. Objects of art were used to reinforce architectural space at the expense of their own content. The Kolbe in the Barcelona Pavilion was a foil to the directed spaces: The message was mainly architectural. The diminutive signs in most Modern buildings contained only the most necessary messages, like LADIES, minor accents begrudgingly applied.

ARCHITECTURE AS SYMBOL

Critics and historians, who documented the "decline of popular symbols" in art, supported orthodox Modern architects, who shunned symbolism of form as an expression or reinforcement of content: meaning was to be communicated, not through allusion to previously known forms, but through the inherent, physiognomic characteristics of form. The creation of architectural form was to be a logical process, free from images of past experience, determined solely by program and structure,

with an occasional assist, as Alan Colquhoun has suggested,² from intuition.

But some recent critics have questioned the possible level of content to be derived from abstract forms. Others have demonstrated that the functionalists, despite their protestations, derived a formal vocabulary of their own, mainly from current art movements and the industrial vernacular; and latter-day followers such as the Archigram group have turned, while similarly protesting, to Pop Art and the space industry. However, most critics have slighted a continuing iconology in popular commercial art, the persuasive heraldry that pervades our environment from the advertising pages of *The New Yorker* to the superbillboards of Houston. And their theory of the "debasement" of symbolic architecture in nineteenth-century eclecticism has blinded them to the value of the representational architecture along highways. Those who acknowledge this roadside eclecticism denigrate it, because it flaunts the cliché of a decade ago as well as the style of a century ago. But why not? Time travels fast today.

The Miami Beach Modern motel on a bleak stretch of highway in southern Delaware reminds jaded drivers of the welcome luxury of a tropical resort, persuading them, perhaps, to forgo the gracious plantation across the Virginia border called Motel Monticello. The real hotel in Miami alludes to the international stylishness of a Brazilian resort, which, in turn, derives from the International Style of middle Corbu. This evolution from the high source through the middle source to the low source took only 30 years. Today, the middle source, the neo-Eclectic architecture of the 1940s and the 1950s, is less interesting than its commercial adaptations. Roadside copies of Ed Stone are more interesting than the real Ed Stone.

§ SYMBOL IN SPACE BEFORE FORM IN SPACE: LAS VEGAS AS A COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

The sign for the Motel Monticello, a silhouette of an enormous Chipendale highboy, is visible on the highway before the motel itself. This architecture of styles and signs is antispacial; it is an architecture of communication over space; communication dominates space as an element in the architecture and in the landscape (Figs. 1-6). But it is for a new scale of landscape. The philosophical associations of the old eclecticism evoked subtle and complex meanings to be savored in the docile spaces of a traditional landscape. The commercial persuasion of roadside eclecticism provokes bold impact in the vast and complex setting of a new landscape of big spaces, high speeds, and complex programs.

2. Alan Colquhoun, "Typology and Design Method," *Arena*, Journal of the Architectural Association (June 1967), pp. 11-14.

Styles and signs make connections among many elements, far apart and seen fast. The message is basely commercial; the context is basically new.

A driver 30 years ago could maintain a sense of orientation in space. At the simple crossroad a little sign with an arrow confirmed what was obvious. One knew where one was. When the crossroads becomes a cloverleaf, one must turn right to turn left, a contradiction poignantly evoked in the print by Allan D'Arcangelo (Fig. 7). But the driver has no time to ponder paradoxical subtleties within a dangerous, sinuous maze. He or she relies on signs for guidance—enormous signs in vast spaces at high speeds.

The dominance of signs over space at a pedestrian scale occurs in big airports. Circulation in a big railroad station required little more than a simple axial system from taxi to train, by ticket window, stores, waiting room, and platform—all virtually without signs. Architects object to signs in buildings: "If the plan is clear, you can see where to go." But complex programs and settings require complex combinations of media beyond the purer architectural triad of structure, form, and light at the service of space. They suggest an architecture of bold communication rather than one of subtle expression.

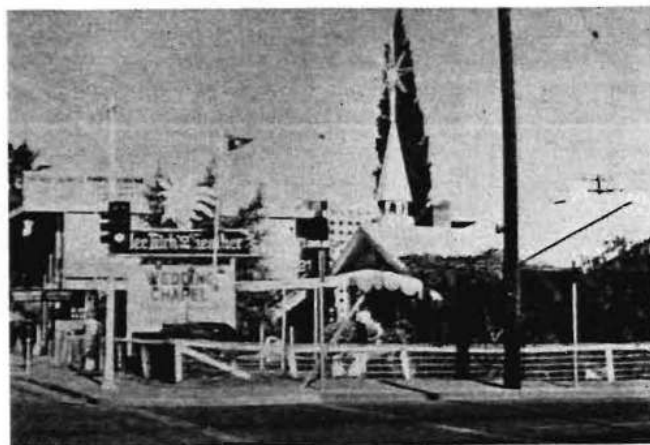
§ THE ARCHITECTURE OF PERSUASION

The cloverleaf and airport communicate with moving crowds in cars or on foot for efficiency and safety. But words and symbols may be used in space for commercial persuasion (Figs. 6, 28). The Middle Eastern bazaar contains no signs; the Strip is virtually all signs (Fig. 8). In the bazaar, communication works through proximity. Along its narrow aisles, buyers feel and smell the merchandise, and the merchant applies explicit oral persuasion. In the narrow streets of the medieval town, although signs occur, persuasion is mainly through the sight and smell of the real cakes through the doors and windows of the bakery. On Main Street, shop-window displays for pedestrians along the sidewalks and exterior signs, perpendicular to the street for motorists, dominate the scene almost equally.

On the commercial strip the supermarket windows contain no merchandise. There may be signs announcing the day's bargains, but they are to be read by pedestrians approaching from the parking lot. The building itself is set back from the highway and half hidden, as is most of the urban environment, by parked cars (Fig. 9). The vast parking lot is in front, not at the rear, since it is a symbol as well as a convenience. The building is low because air conditioning demands low spaces, and merchandising techniques discourage second floors; its architecture is neutral because it can hardly be seen from the road. Both merchandise



3. Dunes Casino and Hotel, Las Vegas



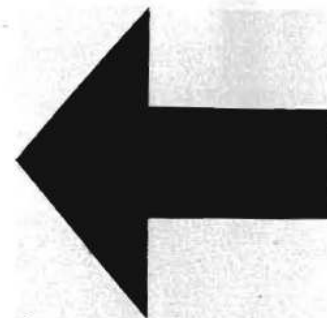
4. Wedding chapel, Las Vegas



5. Stardust Casino and Hotel, Las Vegas



6. Night messages, Las Vegas

7. Allan D'Arcangelo, *The Trip*

DIRECTIONAL SPACE

	SPACE · SCALE	SPEED	SYMBOL sign-symbol-bldg ratio
EASTERN BAZAAR		3 MPH	
MEDIEVAL STREET		3 MPH	
MAIN STREET		3 MPH 20 MPH	W
COMMERCIAL STRIP		35 MPH	
THE STRIP		35 MPH	
SHOPPING CENTER		3 MPH 50 MPH	

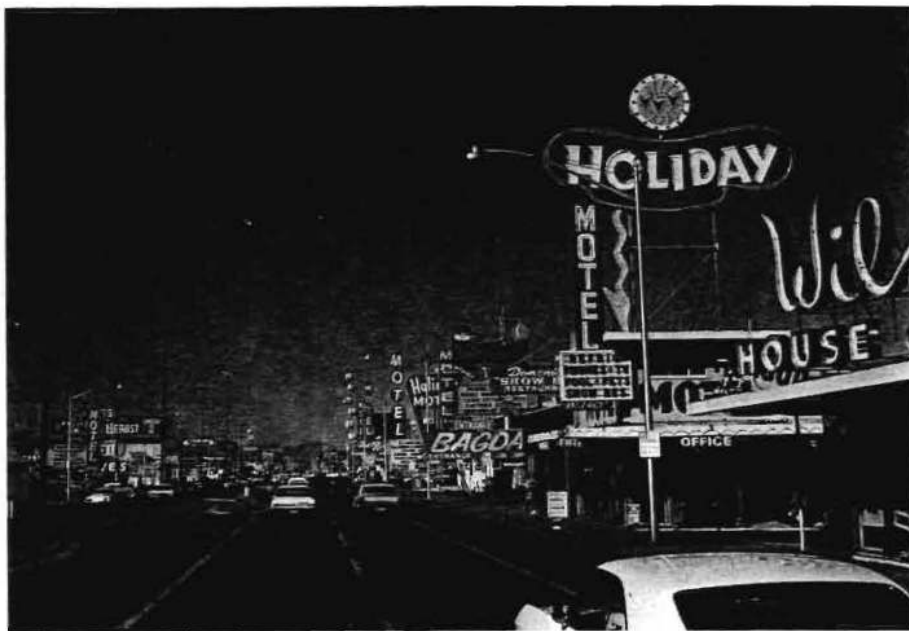
8. A comparative analysis of directional spaces



9. Parking lot of a suburban supermarket



10. Tanya billboard on the Strip



11. Lower Strip, looking north

and architecture are disconnected from the road. The big sign leaps to connect the driver to the store, and down the road the cake mixes and detergents are advertised by their national manufacturers on enormous billboards inflected toward the highway. The graphic sign in space has become the architecture of this landscape (Figs. 10, 11). Inside, the A&P has reverted to the bazaar except that graphic packaging has replaced the oral persuasion of the merchant. At another scale, the shopping center off the highway returns in its pedestrian malls to the medieval street.

§ VAST SPACE IN THE HISTORICAL TRADITION AND AT THE A&P

The A&P parking lot is a current phase in the evolution of vast space since Versailles (Fig. 12). The space that divides high-speed highway and low, sparse buildings produces no enclosure and little direction. To move through a piazza is to move between high enclosing forms. To move through this landscape is to move over vast expansive texture: the megatexture of the commercial landscape. The parking lot is the *parterre* of the asphalt landscape (Fig. 13). The patterns of parking lines give direction much as the paving patterns, curbs, borders, and *tapis vert* give direction in Versailles; grids of lamp posts substitute for obelisks, rows of urns and statues as points of identity and continuity in the vast space. But it is the highway signs, through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, their particular positions in space, their inflected shapes, and their graphic meanings, that identify and unify the megatexture. They make verbal and symbolic connections through space, communicating a complexity of meanings through hundreds of associations in few seconds from far away. Symbol dominates space. Architecture is not enough. Because the spatial relationships are made by symbols more than by forms, architecture in this landscape becomes symbol in space rather than form in space. Architecture defines very little: The big sign and the little building is the rule of Route 66.

The sign is more important than the architecture. This is reflected in the proprietor's budget. The sign at the front is a vulgar extravaganza, the building at the back, a modest necessity. The architecture is what is cheap. Sometimes the building is the sign: The duck store in the shape of a duck, called "The Long Island Duckling," (Figs. 14, 15) is sculptural symbol and architectural shelter. Contradiction between outside and inside was common in architecture before the Modern movement, particularly in urban and monumental architecture. (Fig. 16). Baroque domes were symbols as well as spatial constructions, and they are bigger in scale and higher outside than inside in order to dominate their urban setting and communicate their symbolic message. The false fronts of

VAST SPACE



SPACE · SCALE

VERSAILLES



ENGLISH GARDEN



BROADACRE CITY
LEVITTOWN



VILLE RADIEUSE



HIGHWAY
INTERCHANGE



THE STRIP



SPACE · SCALE · SPEED · SYMBOL

12. A comparative analysis of vast spaces



SYMBOL

symbol word architecture
● W ▲ elements



statues-urns
fountains
partere
curbs



trees
runes
temples of love



usonian houses
ranch houses



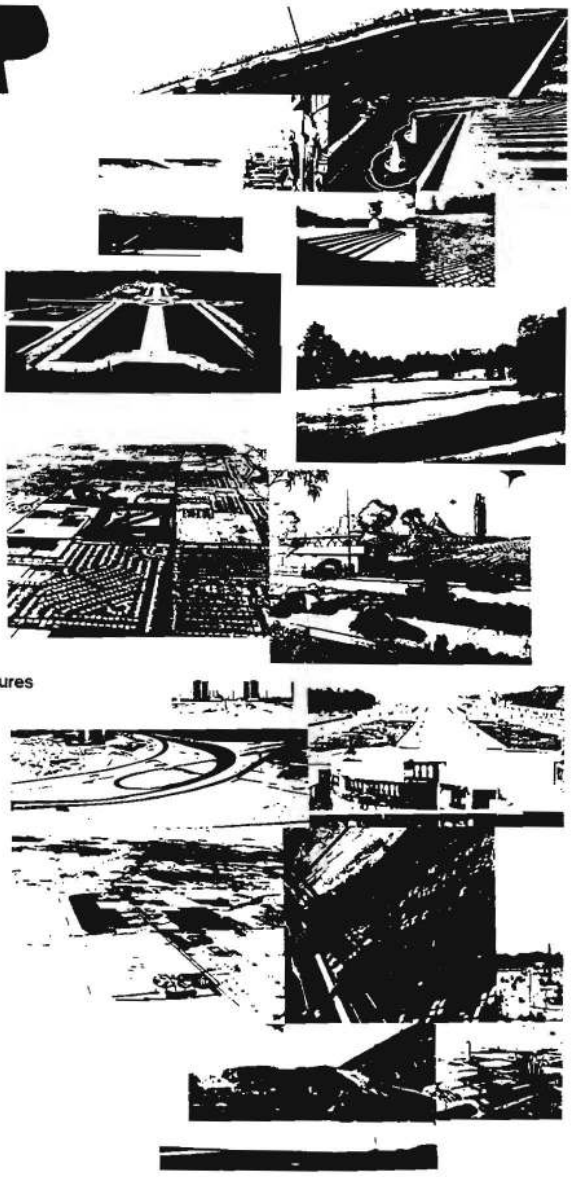
proto-megastructures

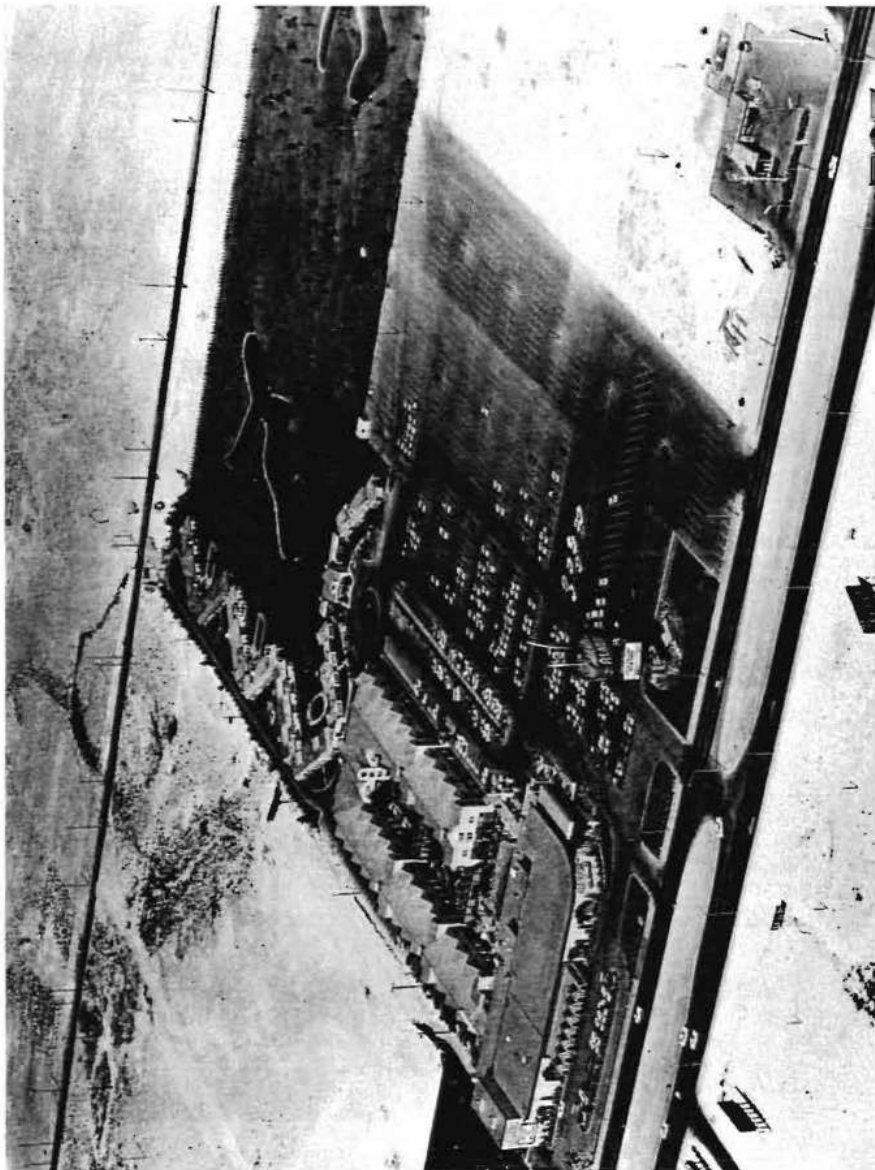


green signs



see other topics

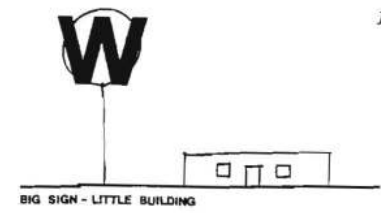




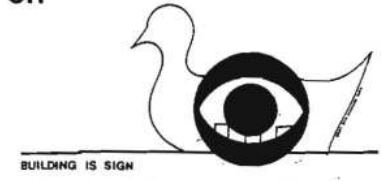
13. Aladdin Casino and Hotel, Las Vegas



14. "The Long Island Duckling" from *God's Own Junkyard*



OR



15. Big sign-little building or building as sign

SCALE SPEED SYMBOL

AMIENS		persuader to enclosed space			
EGYPTIAN PYLON		space divider with civic messages			
TRIUMPHAL ARCH		complex-space connector			
ROMAN THEATRE		ambiguous back drop			
HIWAY BILLBOARD		vast-space persuader			
LAS VEGAS		vast-space connector			

16. A comparative analysis of "billboards" in space

Western stores did the same thing: They were bigger and taller than the interiors they fronted to communicate the store's importance and to enhance the quality and unity of the street. But false fronts are of the order and scale of Main Street. From the desert town on the highway in the West of today, we can learn new and vivid lessons about an impure architecture of communication. The little low buildings, gray-brown like the desert, separate and recede from the street that is now the highway, their false fronts disengaged and turned perpendicular to the highway as big, high signs. If you take the signs away, there is no place. The desert town is intensified communication along the highway.

FROM ROME TO LAS VEGAS

Las Vegas is the apotheosis of the desert town. Visiting Las Vegas in the mid-1960s was like visiting Rome in the late 1940s. For young Americans in the 1940s, familiar only with the auto-scaled, gridiron city and the antiurban theories of the previous architectural generation, the traditional urban spaces, the pedestrian scale, and the mixtures, yet continuities, of styles of the Italian piazzas were a significant revelation. They rediscovered the piazza. Two decades later architects are perhaps ready for similar lessons about large open space, big scale, and high speed. Las Vegas is to the Strip what Rome is to the Piazza.

There are other parallels between Rome and Las Vegas: their expansive settings in the Campagna and in the Mojave Desert, for instance, that tend to focus and clarify their images. On the other hand, Las Vegas was built in a day, or rather, the Strip was developed in a virgin desert in a short time. It was not superimposed on an older pattern as were the pilgrim's Rome of the Counter-Reformation and the commercial strips of eastern cities, and it is therefore easier to study. Each city is an archetype rather than a prototype, an exaggerated example from which to derive lessons for the typical. Each city vividly superimposes elements of a supranational scale on the local fabric: churches in the religious capital, casinos and their signs in the entertainment capital. These cause violent juxtapositions of use and scale in both cities. Rome's churches, off streets and piazzas, are open to the public; the pilgrim, religious or architectural, can walk from church to church. The gambler or architect in Las Vegas can similarly take in a variety of casinos along the Strip. The casinos and lobbies of Las Vegas are ornamental and monumental and open to the promenading public; a few old banks and railroad stations excepted, they are unique in American cities. Nolli's map of the mid-eighteenth century reveals the sensitive and complex connections between public and private space in Rome (Fig. 17). Private building is shown in gray crosshatching that is carved into by the public spaces, exterior *and* interior. These spaces, open or

roofed, are shown in minute detail through darker *poché*. Interiors of churches read like piazzas and courtyards of palaces, yet a variety of qualities and scales is articulated.

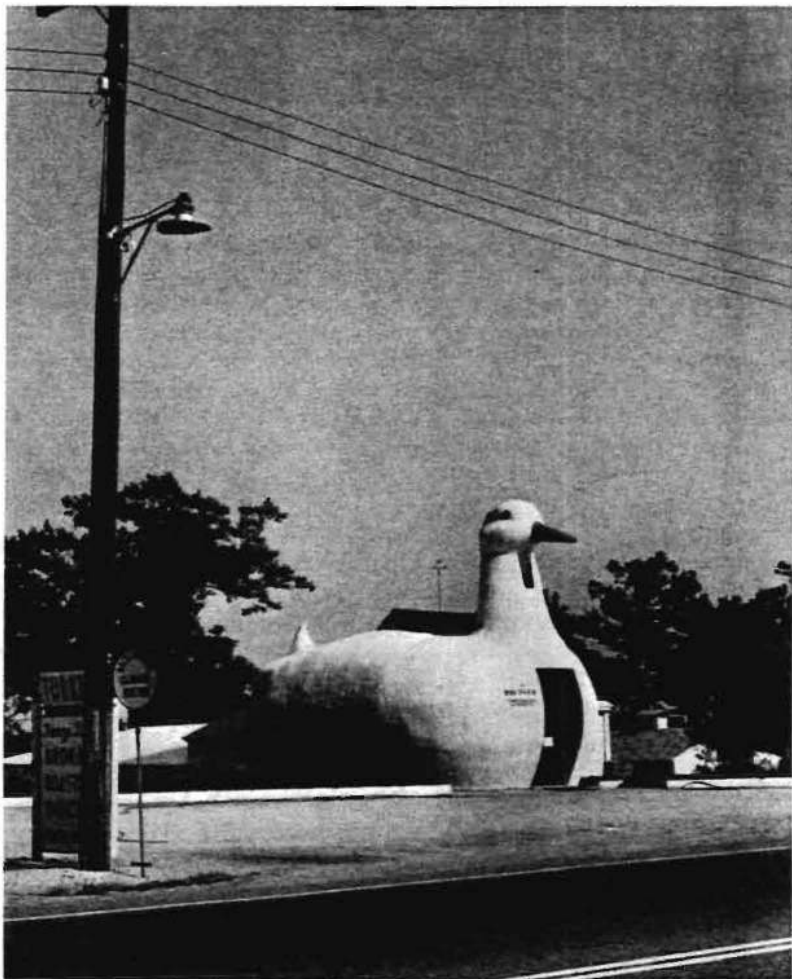
§ MAPS OF LAS VEGAS

A "Nolli" map of the Las Vegas Strip reveals and clarifies what is public and what is private, but here the scale is enlarged by the inclusion of the parking lot, and the solid-to-void ratio is reversed by the open spaces of the desert. Mapping the Nolli components from an aerial photograph provides an intriguing crosscut of Strip systems (Fig. 18). These components, separated and redefined, could be undeveloped land, asphalt, autos, buildings, and ceremonial space (Figs. 19 *a-e*). Reassembled, they describe the Las Vegas equivalent of the pilgrims' way, although the description, like Nolli's map, misses the iconological dimensions of the experience (Fig. 20).

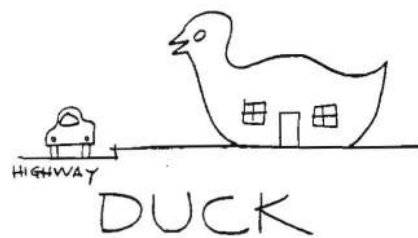
A conventional land-use map of Las Vegas can show the overall structure of commercial use in the city as it relates to other uses but none of the detail of use type or intensity. "Land-use" maps of the insides of casino complexes, however, begin to suggest the systematic planning that all casinos share (Fig. 21). Strip "address" and "establishment" maps can depict both intensity and variety of use (Fig. 22). Distribution maps show patterns of, for example, churches, and food stores (Figs. 24, 25) that Las Vegas shares with other cities and those such as wedding chapels and auto rental stations (Figs. 26, 27) that are Strip-oriented and unique. It is extremely hard to suggest the atmospheric qualities of Las Vegas, because these are primarily dependent on warts (Fig. 23), animation, and iconology; however, "message maps," tourist maps, and brochures suggest some of it (Figs. 28, 71).

§ MAIN STREET AND THE STRIP

A street map of Las Vegas reveals two scales of movement within the gridiron plan: that of Main Street and that of the Strip (Figs. 29, 30). The main street of Las Vegas is Fremont Street, and the earlier of two concentrations of casinos is located along three of four blocks of this street (Fig. 31). The casinos here are bazaarlike in the immediacy to the sidewalk of their clicking and tinkling gambling machines (Fig. 32). The Fremont Street casinos and hotels focus on the railroad depot at the head of the street; here the railroad and main street scales of movement connect. The depot building is now gone, replaced by a hotel, and the bus station is now the busier entrance to town, but the axial focus on the railroad depot from Fremont Street was visual, and possibly sym-



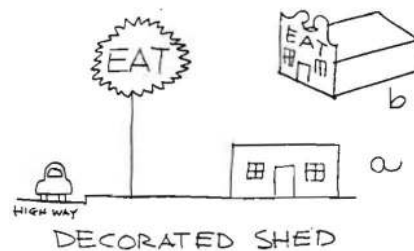
73. "Long Island Duckling" from *God's Own Junkyard*



75. Duck



74. Road scene from *God's Own Junkyard*



76. Decorated shed