

LEARNING FROM THE SYMBOL: Image and Symbolic Reference in Early Post-modern Architectural Discourse

David Pérez

Professor of “Keys to the contemporary artistic discourse”
Universitat Politècnica de València (Polytechnic University of
Valencia)

This article makes an approach to the symbolic recovery as the fundamental argument used in the revised edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* (Venturi, Scott Brown & Izenour, 1977), a text which had with important repercussions on counter-modernist architectural theory. This recovery, extremely critical with the vulgarised imposition of the functionalism of the international style, coincides with the North American Neo-avantgarde’s rejection of the formalist academicism of abstract expressionism, as well as with the crisis of the concept of modernity, caused by what was conceptualised, not without certain confusion, as post-modern thought.

KEY WORDS: POST-MODERNITY/ARCHITECTURAL THEORY/SYMBOLIC ARCHITECTURE/ACADEMICIST FORMALISM/LAS VEGAS

An Argument by Way of Introduction

On such a unique, and for diverse circumstances, charismatic year as 1968, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown published in the *Architectural Forum* issue corresponding to the month of March, a brief article that would be printed again in *Lotus* magazine that same year. The text, “A Significance for A & P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas”, would serve both authors, together with a small group of professors and students of architecture, urbanism and drawing, as a basis to develop a research project in the fall of the mentioned year. It would be carried out in the Yale School of Art and Architecture. This study takes its line of discourse from the recognisable constructive repertory of Las Vegas – based both on the strip or urban configuration surging from the neighbourhood of a main through way or high way, as in the sprawl or ramification of its structures, using the characteristic commercial landscape of hotels and casinos existing in this North American city, to perform, from the architectonic and design perspective, a “formal analysis” of the same.

For this reason, a little later, specifically in 1972, the first edition of one of the essays that have had greatest influence in the exercise of canonical architectural criticism in the modernity movement was published. We refer to *Learning from Las Vegas*, the text would achieve its final version in 1977 thanks to the publication of the second, revised, edition. This edition in which Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown participated, as in the first one, with Steven Izenour, would not only try to modify the excessive late-Bauhaus design or the original edition, somewhat contradictory with the contents of the volume, or cut down high publishing costs, seeking with it to increase the number of potential readers in a student sphere, but also to offer in its conceptual development a better and briefer argumentative synthesis.

However, if we refer to this circumstance it is because in the 1977 edition the title of the book, *Learning from Las Vegas*, was completed with a subtitle which, within the present context, we want to remark: *The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. With it, the authors considered a fundamental aspect related to the symbolism and the oblivion to which it has been subjected by the lexicalised modern architecture. In this sense, the recent re-edition in Spanish of this volume, within the collection GG Reprints – a collection devoted to recovering editions sold out although respecting the original number of copies. In this case, it was carried out by the same Gustavo Gili in 1978 – allows us to consider the matter: the analysis of the relationships that can be established among the ideas of the post-modernity, architecture and symbolic reclamation, an analysis full of nuances. However, there is something the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* pose in an expeditious manner from the prologue of the work. We refer to the fact that the objective they wish to achieve with their essay is not addressed strictly speaking, to approaching Las Vegas, in so much as reality and/or urban phenomena, but rather to approach the role sym-

David Pérez. Degree in Philosophy and Art History. PhD in Fine Arts. Professor of “Keys to the contemporary artistic discourse” in the Universitat Politècnica de València. He has published “La mirada contra la Historia (1995), Femenino, Plural (1996), Del arte impuro (1997), Malas artes. Experiencia estética y legitimación institucional (2003), La certeza vulnerable. Cuerpo y fotografía en el siglo XXI (2004), Sin marco: arte y actitud (2008) and Dicho y hecho. Textos de artista y teoría del arte (2012).

bolism can assume in the form of contemporary architecture.

With it, this reclaiming of what is symbolic to which our authors appeal must be taken, not as the formulation of an architectonic mind set transferable in a mechanical way to any other reality, but rather as a enriching possibility of a constructive action with the will of diversity, since “the more diverse architecture is at this point, the better it will be”.¹ In this sense, the vindication of the symbol must not be read as an compulsory cloning that, from the publicity empire – so evident, on the other hand in the landscape of Las Vegas –, can be used as a prescription applicable in any urban context, since it is not about placing neon ads in the Champs Eliseés or a blinding “2+2=4” on the roof of the Mathematics Building.² The reference to symbols, consequently, must be interpreted as a semantic resource to relocate the communicative value of architecture, a value which is fully present from even in the initial proposals of modernity. Let’s consider, for example, in the paradigmatic cases of Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe, but also of less known authors, but not for that less interesting from a conceptual point of view, such as Paul Scheerbar, considered one of the first authors linked to the vanguard with an expressionist bias.

Scheerbar is a protean character whose versatile and contrasted interests spanned from literature and drawing to the invention of perpetual motion artifacts,³ founded the *Verlag deutscher Phantasten* [Publications of the German fantastic-visionaries] in Berlin in 1892. In 1914, shortly before his death, he published a surprising, semi-esoteric and hallucinated eulogy centered on the architecture of glass – the *Glasarchitektur* an essay whose first edition was in the magazine *Der Sturm*. The text is devoted to the architect Bruno Taut, using a prophetic-redemptionist tone through which the architect extols the symbolic use of glass.⁴ This material, representing the contemporary extension of the gothic cathedrals – authentic precedent of the architecture of glass – acts as a purifying reality thanks to its saving transparency, granting profound symbolic spirituality to the constructions in which it is found. Curiously, Scheerbar’s wager would find its ethereal materialisation in the *Glashaus*, the glass pavilion Taut presented, also during 1914, in the Deutscher Werkbund exhibition in Cologne.

Academicised Modernity and Neutralisation of Criticism

The above reference to Scheerbar allows us to remark upon an issue which the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* highlighted from the start. Rejection of the link between symbology and architecture that fosters the constructive discourse of a modernity which, in Jameson’s words, wants to “insert a new,

different and more elevated utopic language”.⁵ It is not, regardless of what it might seem from an oblique reading, something inherent to its initial program, as Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour point out, “modern architects work with analogy, symbol and image”, besides being “sensitive to their time” in proclaiming the “correct revolution”.⁶ To the contrary, the rejection of this connection is produced by divulging the vulgarised imposition that when some models adjusted to needs derived from specific situations become canons and are prolonged and distorted in themselves according to a discourse that is basically defined by its intolerance, “modern architecture has been everything except tolerant”, intolerance that is precisely so because it eliminates the possibility of “questioning our way of looking at things.”⁷

In relation to this, we should not forget that such approaches will not be limited to the architectural scope alone. This gallant assimilation of modernity, or, this cauterisation of the ethical-aesthetical feature of the project that is inherent to modernity, will also give way in other artistic sensitivities to merely cosmetic transformations, inoperative in a social perspective. In this sense, the semantic de-activation to which we refer will affect both the plastic scope and, through a process of reductionism, find its final formulation in the formalist propositions fostered by the tandem Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. These propositions will act as the conceptual legitimacy program in the process of academisation and standardisation to which the abstract expressionism discourse will be subjected.

Consequently, we consider certain caution should be used in qualifying specific post modern positions and attitudes, since they will do nothing but develop and delve in some neo-vanguard proposals present in North American and European art from the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, which, for example, even though limited to the development of contemporary photography, was highlighted by Jorge Ribalta pointing out that certain artistic counter-practice surging from the world of the analogical image from the 1970s “seeking alternatives to the institutionalised formalism of late modernity”,⁸ rejected “the pretended a return to art in praxis vital”,⁹ a matter, it should not be forgotten, was a priority for the historic vanguards, in their will to transcend the strictly plastic space, understood as an autonomous and self-reflexive reality.

In this manner, before neutralising and/or deactivating the more critical aspects of the modern discourse through the self-centered banalisation of its less conflictive features, we find a recovery, called post-modern, with all the conceptual inaccuracies that the indiscriminate use of this term supposes, that in truth proposes not so much transcending modernity, as its committed reactivation. The questioning of this pretended transcendence is deter-

01

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: *Aprendiendo de Las Vegas. El simbolismo olvidado de la forma arquitectónica*, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2011, p. 14.

02

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: *op. cit.*, p. 19.

03

SCHEERBART, PAUL: *El móvil perpetuo. Historia de un invento*, Madrid, Gallo Nero, 2014.

04

SCHEERBART, PAUL: *La arquitectura de cristal*, Murcia, Colegio Oficial de Aparejadores y Arquitectos Técnicos de Murcia, 1998.

05

JAMESON, FREDRIC: *El posmodernismo o la lógica cultural del capitalismo avanzado*, Barcelona, Paidós, 1991, p. 89.

06

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: *op. cit.*, pp. 23 y 14.

07

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: *op. cit.*, p. 22.

mined by the sense of temporal expiration that comes with the prefix post that limits the afterwards of something already past and the consequent transcendence and/or rejection of the previous phenomena, provoking certain doubts, specially when this use places it beyond the artistic-architectural scope, specifically, in discursive spaces related with contemporary philosophy and thought.

Verification of these reserves, evidenced in the positions of Jürgen Habermas and in his consideration of modernity as an “incomplete and/or unfulfilled project”, allows authors such as Hal Foster to pose the existence in a “reactionary and neoconservative post modernity” facing another one of “opposition” and “resistance”. The latter, a post modernism that is belligerent with the lexicalised assimilation of determined aspects of the modern project, will aspire, although without universalising ingenuities or revisionisms devoid of history, to the critical consolidation of positions and strategies that, as we have insinuated, are found closely related with some of the approaches of the historic vanguards themselves, and even if the historic range of possibilities with the formulation of certain attitudes that Charles Baudelaire had already identified in his approximations to the phenomena of dandyism and the new understanding of the present as an object of criticism.

Recognition of a critical post modernism facing a post modernism openly reactionary will be pointed out by Foster in the well known volume that he devoted to the subject in the mid 1980s. This author, linked with the positions stated in *October*, an influential magazine, neatly posed the need and the limits of conflict: “We see the surge of a post modernism of resistance as a counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also of the “false normality” of a reactionary post modernism.” To accept this fact would mean to assume that a “resistant post modernism is interested in the critical de-construction of tradition, not by an instrumental pastiche of pop or pseudo-historic forms” and thus aestheticised, as well as reference to its critical deconstruction allow highlighting the aim that the resistant postmodernism strives to reach. An aim that will not suppose regressive return to some pretended essentials, irradiating and universally fixed, but the setting into motion one of the “criticism of the origins”.¹⁰

Now, the reflection made by Foster alludes to a specific aspect that we wish to consider, since he openly questions the recovery of the vernacular architectural language associated to the mediatic-commercial landscape is introduced by Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour. We refer to the necessary deconstruction to which, according to the author of *“El retorno de lo real”* (Return to Real), the quote-heavy and pseudo-historic pastiche with pop resonances that we can find in determined post modern positions, a pastiche

that, according to Fredric Jameson, carries the “random robbery of all the past styles”.¹¹

From Pastiche to Symbolic Recovery

Before Foster, Jameson posed in the first English language edition his essay, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1984, the vulgarising sense that the pastiche possesses in relation to the clumsiness maintained with parody, a resource that doubtlessly shows greater intelligence. “The pastiche, Jameson writes, is like parody, an imitation of a specific grimace, a discourse that speaks like a dead language: but it is the neutral repetition of the mime, lacking the underlying reasons of parody, unbound from the satirical impulse, deprived of hilarity (...) The pastiche is, consequently, an empty parody, a blind statue.¹² As can be easily deduced, Jameson’s criticism, the same as Foster’s, indicated rejection of what could be understood as an empty and repetitive articulation of an “aesthetic populism” that could be defined as weak since it creates a weakening mind set from a weak thought. A populism, rather than questioning reality, reinforces its mechanisms of degradation through non-critical assimilation, fully torn from the statement of parody, that ends in the assumption of the kitsch discourse and is consequently the banalisation of criticism and the conversion of it into an integral part of the realm of what is spectacular.

This is why we have previously alluded to the ambiguous character – and occasionally imprecise – that post modernity possesses, in so far as the discourse can overlap with pre-modern proposals. In fact, although the concept had already been used in different spheres and disciplines, we will have to wait until 1979 for the publication of the first work of strictly philosophic character in which it is used – and it is so from its very title – the term postmodern. We refer, as can be imagined, to the text of *La condition post-moderne* (The Post Modern Condition) that Jean-François Lyotard wrote as “a circumstantial text” after having received the official commission of the *Conseil des Universités* of the government of Quebec, to make a report on “the condition of knowledge in developed societies,” a condition that would be defined as post modern, since it alludes to the state of our culture “after the transformation that have affected the rules of the game of science, from literature to the arts from the XIX Century,¹³ as well as the new social situation that these alterations entail.

Lyotard himself recognises that the term had already been used in spheres, specially North American, in the areas such as sociology, cultural criticism or economy – whether directly or indirectly through, for example the references that Daniel Bell or Alain Touraine make to the notion of post industrial society – the verification that these changes affect the very rules of the game of knowledge would mean an

08

RIBALTA, JORGE (Ed.): *Efecto real. Debates posmodernos sobre fotografía*, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2004, p. 9.

09

BÜRGER, PETER: *Teoría de la vanguardia*, Barcelona, Península, 1987, p. 55.

10

FOSTER, HAL (Ed.): *La posmodernidad*, Barcelona, Kairós, 1985, pp. 11-12.

11

JAMESON, FREDRIC: *op. cit.*, p. 45.

12

JAMESON, FREDRIC: *op. cit.*, pp. 43-44.

13

LYOTARD, JEAN-FRANÇOIS: *La condición postmoderna. Informe sobre el saber*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1984, pp. 9-11.

14

ANDERSON, PERRY: *Los orígenes de la posmodernidad*, Barcelona, Anagrama, 2000, pp. 152 y 154.

15

LYOTARD, JEAN-FRANÇOIS: *La posmodernidad (explicada a los niños)*, Barcelona, Gedisa, 1987, p. 112.

16

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 35 and 40.

17

Incidentally, such dwellings were designed by Minoru Yamasaki, the award-winning architect who would also design later on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre. These were also brought down, for different reasons; with 9/11 they became a metaphor of another kind, and as such, would be a symbol susceptible of rich, profuse hermeneutics.

epistemological revision related to knowledge and the consequent legitimacy of it. This revision would stem from the so called crisis of great accounts, that is, the lack of confidence in these meta-discourses that, sustained on speculative accounts and/or universally emancipative accounts that are disclosed stripped of their operativity.

From this perspective, the articulation of a combative discourse not only with the formalism of an institutionalised modernity, but rather what Perry Anderson characterised as a “plebeian” culture that, supported on the “enormous reduction of its critical substance, tends to produce the “boring position of post modernity”¹⁴ shall serve as basis to that attitude of resistance to which Foster alludes, an attitude, we insist, that more than certifying transcendence and/or rejection of modernity, makes it possible to re-think this concept. A situation, this re-thinking, that has not been interrupted since the Illustration, that Lyotard points out, after his Quebec report, not only to question the “fate of the political totalitarisms reserved for the “vanguards” considered historical” but also to reject the pretended “transcendence” of the vanguardism of our days”, a transcendence that under the pretext that it is necessary to return to the communication with the public,” disguises the truth “disdain of responsibility of resisting and giving testimony, that the vanguards assumed during a century.”¹⁵

Now, the fact that we take these criticisms as a starting point and that we assume fully assume their character does not make us forget two fundamental issues:

1. The contribution made by the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* interested us specially, and hence their insertion in this context of analysis of what is symbolic, by the iconographic recovery they propose, “the symbol dominates space. Architecture is not enough”, and, consequently, through the criticism of the banal architecture that the international style praised monotonously. Criticism, we insist, that can be clarifying independently of what the “architecture of communication” proposed based on a “daring impact” that suggest “commercial persuasion of the highway eclecticism” through three paradoxical features: the disorderly proliferation of signs, “the sign is more important than the architecture”, the excess of car parks and the oversized of the graphic-luminic signs, “if we dispense with the signs, we are left without a place”.¹⁶

2. With this, we must consider the symbolic death of architecture in the modern movement is produced, just as Charles Jenks points out, on 15 July 1972 at 15:32, the instant in which the controlled demolition of a group of social housing Pruitt-Igoe located in Saint Louis Missouri.¹⁷ This disappearance allows remarking on something on which Jenks considered. The architecture of modernity transformed in dogma generates what we can define as mute deed:

to do something “that does not say anything”, since it operates “like a reductionist machine.” The international style, thus, will be “incapable of expressing anything about history, about its content, about its experience; nothing save the concept of repetition.”¹⁸ That is why that it promotes a double contextual autism that we locate both in what concerns history as in what affects the place.

These two aspects impact, in turn, on two complementary facts that define the revitalisation of what is symbolic. On one hand reclaiming the place and in what concerns the semantic context already written and in which the architecture is inscribed; and on the other hand the rejection of homogenisation of the space through the criticism of that constructive abstraction de-symbolised that is shaped by submission to the orthodox structural-pragmatism and apparent rigor with which the discourse is garbed in what is functional.

Conclusions (Intranscendental Symbolic)

The symbolic use, just as Mircea Eliade affirms, traditionally responds to a transcendental sense. “Even when it is not grasped consciously in its entirety the symbol addresses the complete human being and not only its intelligence.”¹⁹ That does not impede us from recognising the persistence of what is symbolic in urban desecralised contexts such as those existing contemporaneously. This persistence however, requires attention devoid of prejudice and free of dogmatisms, that is, attention capable of self-confrontation questioning our way of understanding urban reality, a fact that requires renewed conceptual equipment. The space of Las Vegas is so different from those docile spaces for which our analytic and conceptual tools were developed that we need new concepts and theories to approach it.²⁰

From this perspective, it is possible to learn from Las Vegas. This is because this environment generates “its own pagan and stylistic sources”. This arrangement means that Las Vegas can assume the role of a constructive reality endowed with a specific communicative potential, since it invites through the symbolism of its architecture not only to extend and diversify our spatial receptiveness, but also to detect narrative shortages and conceptual adjustments of our urban discourse. In this sense, “the allusion and commentary, past, present, our great common places and our old clichés, and the inclusion of what is routine in the realm, sacred and profane, exactly what today’s modern architecture is lacking.”²¹ An architecture, not to be forgotten, that faces the challenge having to reformulate as symbolic space and narrative reality, or if you prefer, as a landscape of impurities and process of juxtapositions.

Parting from this, the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* advocate an “architecture as a refuge

covered with symbols”, “Is the ad the building or the building the ad?”,²² an architecture that cannot but evidence the contradiction existing between the symbolic, on one hand, and the form, the structure and the program itself of the building, for another. One contradiction, in turn, is shown architectonically through two possible ways. In the first place, by means of what the authors call “duck building”, a specific type of construction that is conceived in itself as a symbol, this name is alludes directly to singular construction that adopts the shape of this animal, “The Long Island Duckling” building. The “duck building” surges, thus, “when the architectonic systems of space, structure and program are smothered and distorted by a global symbolic form”. Now, together with this solution, there is a second way in which the contradiction to which we allude is shown: that headed by what is called “decorated shed”, a constructive solution that comes up “when the space and structure systems directly serve the program, and the ornament is applied independently from them.”²³

However, a curious fact happens in modern academicist architecture. In banning what is symbolic, it is, itself, forced to emphasise, from an expressive perspective, the structural and functional elements becoming an empty and reiterative discourse sustained by the lexicality of its formulas. That makes the building, and here irony is served, “degenerate into a great ornament”, and all of it, in “substituting decoration for articulation becomes a duck.”²⁴ A conversion that is in no way assumed by those who execute this type of architectural actions or intervention.

Due to it, what Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour vindicate is, together with the re-symbolisation of architecture, a recovery of memory and, for that, an exercise against oblivion and indifference. A recovery centered not so much on an appropriate wink derived from the pastiche, as on self-conscience that all architecture must develop. In this sense it must be considered – because the “formal languages and the associative systems are inevitable and beneficial” – that the problems can only surge when these languages and systems “become tyrannies” that is, “when we are not conscious” of the role they play, which makes us forget the underlying symbolism in them, an “unnoticed symbolism” that has made it possible for the functionalist canonical architecture to design dead ducks.”²⁵ ●

BIBLIOGRAPHY

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: *Aprendiendo de Las Vegas. El simbolismo olvidado de la forma arquitectónica*, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2011, p. 14.

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: op. cit., p. 19.

SCHEERBART, PAUL: *El móvil perpetuo. Historia de un invento*, Madrid, Gallo Nero, 2014.

SCHEERBART, PAUL: *La arquitectura de cristal*, Murcia, Colegio Oficial de Aparejadores y Arquitectos Técnicos de Murcia, 1998.

JAMESON, FREDRIC: *El posmodernismo o la lógica cultural del capitalismo avanzado*, Barcelona, Paidós, 1991, p. 89.

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: op. cit., pp. 23 y 14.

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: op. cit., p. 22.

RIBALTA, JORGE (Ed.): *Efecto real. Debates posmodernos sobre fotografía*, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2004, p. 9.

BÜRGER, PETER: *Teoría de la vanguardia*, Barcelona, Península, 1987, p. 55.

FOSTER, HAL (Ed.): *La posmodernidad*, Barcelona, Kairós, 1985, pp. 11-12.

JAMESON, FREDRIC: op. cit., p. 45.

JAMESON, FREDRIC: op. cit., pp. 43-44.

LYOTARD, JEAN-FRANÇOIS: *La condición postmoderna. Informe sobre el saber*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1984, pp. 9-11.

ANDERSON, PERRY: *Los orígenes de la posmodernidad*, Barcelona, Anagrama, 2000, pp. 152 y 154.

LYOTARD, JEAN-FRANÇOIS: *La posmodernidad (explicada a los niños)*, Barcelona, Gedisa, 1987, p. 112.

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: op. cit., pp. 29, 35 and 40. Incidentally, such dwellings were designed by Minoru Yamasaki, the award-winning architect who would also design later on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre. These were also brought down, for different reasons; with 9/11 they became a metaphore of another kind, and as such, would be a symbol susceptible of rich, profuse hermeneutics.

JENCKS, CHARLES: *El nuevo paradigma en la arquitectura contemporánea*, Valencia, Ediciones Generales de la Construcción, 2004, p. 14.

ELIADE, MIRCEA: *Lo sagrado y lo profano*, Barcelona, Paidós, 1999, p. 96.

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: op. cit., p. 102.

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: op. cit., p. 97.

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: op. cit., p. 100.

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: op. cit., pp. 114-115.

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: op. cit., p. 130.

VENTURI, ROBERT; SCOTT BROWN, DENISE & IZENOUR, STEVEN: op. cit., p. 201.