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Scott Brown and Sontag : Women Who Have Shaped our Views on the Ugly and Ordinary

Yale symposium, February 8th, 2023

As I was invited to contribute to the publication of *Denise Scott Brown In Other Eyes* and to participate in this symposium, I proposed to Frida Grahn to relate a Denise Scott Brown's writing with Susan Sontag's one.

As seen here, both women have been photographed by Lynn Gilbert in the late 1970s in the context of the publication of the volume *Particular Passions : Talks with Women Who Have Shaped our times*.

I have to say that at first glance, much separates Denise from Susan Sontag who I believe never met each other. While the former has endlessly fought elitism in the field of architecture, the latter has been the embodiment of the very same elitism in the literary and artistic milieu.

Denise Scott Brown is a woman of action who worked for half a century to change professional practices in the fields of architecture, urban design and pedagogy. Susan Sontag was a pure intellectual, a writer of avant-garde fictions and a sophisticated essayist who stayed out of academic circles.

£In Philadelphia, Denise worked closely with Bob Venturi within an architectural collective that she always promoted, while Susan Sontag was a prima donna of the New York high society.

But Denise Scott Brown and Susan Sontag also have things in common. They were both born within the same years and received their intellectual training in the late 1950s at the best American universities—Berkeley then Chicago for Sontag, Upenn for Denise.

In their respective domains, they actively participated in the great upheavals that marked the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, before becoming key figures of the american culture in the late 20th century.

But, as I will try today to expose resonances in the works of Denise and Susan Sontag, I will do it specifically out of the examination of two essays they've published a few years apart: "Notes on Camp" and "Learning from Las Vegas". Two essays that have made them at the same time famous and outrageous.

My main hypothesis is that the notion of Camp helps us to understand the meaning of *Learning from Las Vegas* in the same way that Denise and Bob's views on Las Vegas architecture helps us to critically interpret *Notes on Camp*.

Sontag's Camp

Let me remind first what Susan Sontag said about Camp through the fifty-eight aphorisms that she have published in the *Partisan Review* during the fall 1964.

She explained that camp is both a sensibility which concerns an observer, and a quality that applies to the object that he or she observes.

On the sensibility side, "It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon." On the quality side, "the hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance," the excess, the too much.

In respect to the observer, "Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical." One could add non-judgmental. The camp object, on the other hand, is characterized by "a seriousness that fails."

Sontag claimed that there is only true camp in the combination of *sensibility* and *quality*. Camp implies having a sense of irony to the extent that "behind the *straight* public sense in which something can be taken..." artifacts and people always play a role: "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp;' not a woman, but a 'woman.'" And above all, as Sontag put it, camp affirms that there is "a good taste of bad taste". The ultimate slogan being "it's good *because* it's awful".

Camp sensibility belongs to an historical moment – the mid 1960s – but it clearly has antecedents and successors. Sontag claimed that "Camp is modern dandyism. Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture." The connoisseur of Camp indeed shows aristocratic tendencies, even if one takes enjoyment "in the coarsest, commonest pleasures, in the arts of the masses."

Camp shares certain attributes with kitsch, but it has more irony and self-awareness. At best, kitsch is "naive Camp", or "pure Camp." Pop also has some similarities, but it lacks for its part a bit of love for its object: "Pop Art is more flat and more dry, more serious, more detached, ultimately nihilistic".

Then, what about architecture? As Sontag put it, actually "there are 'campy' movies, clothes, furniture, popular songs, novels, people, buildings..."

Scott Brown's Las Vegas

Considering this, with all the flashy casinos and hotels, funny wedding chapels, and glittering giant billboards that sprung along the Strip, Las Vegas had it all to become the mecca of camp.

However, if I believe Benjamin Moser's recent biography, Susan Sontag has never paid a visit to the so called Sin City or has shown any interest into it. As a matter of fact, very few American intellectuals granted importance to Las Vegas in the mid 1960s aside from Tom Wolfe who wrote an exhilarating article for *Esquire* magazine.

Thus, Denise Scott Brown was a forerunner when she patrolled the Strip for the first time in 1965 a year after *Notes on Camp* was published.

She was actually predisposed to take a comprehensive look at the gaudy constructions since she had mingled with the New Brutalists in England in the 1950s. From that earlier experience Denise has learned that "beauty (albeit an agonized beauty) can be derived from hard reality, and that facing uncomfortable facts can sharpen the eye and refine one's aesthetic ability."

As she brought Bob Venturi to Las Vegas, Denise shares with him a "rule-breaking outlook to aesthetic" and her interest into "ugly things". In *Particular Passions* the book I mentioned previously she remembered: "Dazed by the desert sun and dazzled by the signs, both loving and hating what we saw, we were jolted clear out of our aesthetic skins."

As an outcome of this moving experience *Learning from Las Vegas* was first published in March 1968 in *The Architectural Forum*. As I already suggested, this text might be read as a manifestation of the camp sensibility, however it is not explicit.

Firstly, Denise and Bob actually considered Las Vegas as a purely visual phenomenon, if not an aesthetic one, as they described an "architecture of styles and signs". Moreover their study of the Strip, and more extensively of the commercial boulevard, focused on the more extravagant of its landmarks, from the Caesar's Palace to the Stardust Sign.

Secondly, the two architects' gaze could be described as camp inasmuch it seems to be non-judgmental, depoliticized, and amoral. Both made it clear on several occasions that they should not be bothered for a lack of social commitment. Resolute to keep the different concerns apart, they insisted that "the morality of commercial advertising, gambling interests, and the competitive instinct is not at issue here."

Thirdly, the second part of *Learning from Las Vegas* that has been published in *The Architectural Forum* during the fall of 1971 sounds more explicitly camp, as Denise and Bob playfully juggled with good and bad taste.

As they praised the “Ugly and Ordinary Architecture”, they listed the features of the Guild House : “The technologically unadvanced brick, the old-fashioned, double-hung windows, the pretty materials around the entrance, and the ugly antenna not hidden behind the parapet in the accepted fashion...” Their design of the facade of the building, however, is cleverly elaborated, full of artifice. Obviously, the Guild House is rather camp than kitsch, not naive at all.

Somehow in *Learnign from Las Vegas* Denise and Bob often saw things in quotation marks too : It’s an “antenna”, It’s a “duck”, it’s a “monument”, it’s “Las Vegas”...Their texte is masterpiece of wit and irony. But, I insisted, the two authors showed true consideration and even love for the artifacts of commercial and popular culture. *Learning from Las Vegas* is in my view camp rather than pop.

Camp or not Camp?

If Denise and Bob never claimed to have a camp view on commercial architecture, the study of the reception of *Learning from Las Vegas* is suggesting that its readers thought differently.

For instance, Tomas Maldonado, Martin Pawley, and Kenneth Frampton have complained about “the camp cult of the ugly and the ordinary”.

But it is Charles Jencks, in *Modern Movements in Architecture*, who picked up more seriously Sontag’s idea and divided American architecture into “Camp” and “Non-Camp.”

He focused on aestheticization and depoliticization, then he related camp to formalism and to the International Style.

Interestingly, Jencks pinned Venturi and Scott Brown as a non-camp architects who, although incorporating pop or camp materials, had nothing to do with formalism, and could even be considered “morally hot.” Let’s notice that with his binary classification, Jencks missed the irony and the second-degree of camp.

More relevantly, C. Ray Smith, considered camp in architecture as a matter of sensibility in his book *Supermannerism: New Attitudes in Post-Modern Architecture*.

He argued that educated people have long been confronted with the spectacle of consumerism, the obscenity of advertising, and the vulgar transformation of the visual environment.

As he summarized: “Artists, instead of being merely outraged and horrified by all of this, instead of rejecting it all as exclusively as possible, determined (in their hideous fascination) that the way to make those artifacts of our undesigned, uncouth, philistine,

everyday culture better was to make fun of them, to make a big, joking, tongue-in-cheek put-down of them. ” C. Ray Smith then related the camp sensibility in architecture to the work Morris Lapidus, Charles Moore and above all Venturi Scott Brown.

Which camp?

At this stage, I believe it is important to challenge Sontag's assertion that camp sensibility is “disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical”. Indeed, camp has always been used since the 1950's to defend marginal cultural and social forms and behaviors. It flourished as a way to oppose to mainstream views of normality. The gay community has used it to confront heterosexuals with their prejudices.

As Judith Butler observed, camp played a significant political role through its capacity to shake up preconceived ideas, to reverse understandings, and to exaggerate the artificiality of what the dominant cultural players perceived as natural.

In a similar way, Denise and Bob challenged the architectural norms. They undermined Modernist orthodoxy by welcoming extravagant roadside constructions into the architectural repertoire.

Denise did it too by redeeming the suburban home when she designed the Learning from Levittown studio in the early 1970's.

Denise and Bob actually showed a new kind of commitment at the very moment social and political battles were losing intensity. By questioning the founding of good taste and acknowledging the popular culture, they were opening a new front.

For Denise and Bob, being revolutionary for an architect did not mean dreaming of a utopia but rather showing empathy for people's true expectations and for the existing city as it is – and as they like it.

In his book *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* Andrew Ross is saying that:

“Unlike the traditional intellectual, whose function is to legitimize the cultural power of ruling interests, or the organic intellectual, who promotes the interests of a rising class, the marginal, camp intellectual expresses his impotence as the dominated fraction of a ruling bloc as he distances himself from the conventional morality and taste of the ascendant middle class.”

It seems to me that Denise followed such a narrow and perilous path, as she identified herself as an American architect who has to get her hands dirty.

In the 1970s, she and Bob had to deal with a political, social and economic context that was less and less favorable to the production of pure architecture. Then they had to look at the

worl round them with irony, to laught at it so they don't cry as Denise said to Stanislaus von Moos in an interview in 1975.

To conclude I would like to suggest that Denise and Bob writing on Las Vegas expressed thereby a melancholy which could associate with the loss of a better world, but also the awareness that the one they lived in can still be enchanting.