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On Camp, Revolutionariness, and Architecture

Valery Didelon

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For more than fifty years, Denise Scott Brown has tirelessly contributed to changing the way architects look at themselves – and, quite possibly, changing the way that society looks at architects. Firstly, she challenged the quasi-exclusively male representation of architectural practice, courageously denouncing endemic sexism in the field. She also fought anti-intellectualism in professional circles by promoting the uses of social sciences in the development of urban planning and architectural design. Moreover, she broadened the culture of architects by including popular and commercial buildings and artifacts, long despised by highbrow historians and critics. On the latter point, I will be suggesting here that together with Robert Venturi, Scott Brown demonstrated a "camp" sensibility – an attitude described and theorized by one of her contemporaries, namely the American essayist Susan Sontag. Although there is little indication that Scott Brown was aware of "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964)¹ or that later on Sontag read *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972),² it is fruitful to cross-examine these two seminal texts, written and co-written a few years apart by two women who made indelible marks on American intellectual life. Such analysis might in particular shed some light on the way social commitment changed in the field of architecture after 1968.

Taking Notes

Let us begin with the tricky task of defining camp. What one knows about it is mainly what Sontag said through fifty-eight aphorisms published in the mid-1960s.³ She explained that camp is both a sensibility that concerns an observer and also 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. With regard to the observer, "Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical." The camp object, on the other hand, is characterized by "a seriousness that fails."

Sontag claimed that true camp lies only in the combination of sensibility and quality: for example, collecting old Flash Gordon comics, appreciating popular furniture and decoration as a connoisseur, or finding aesthetic qualities in old pornographic movies. Camp implies having a sense of irony to the extent that "behind the 'straight' public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing." 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," her ultimate slogan being "it's good because it's awful." Camp sensibility belongs to a 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 Art also has some similarities, but it lacks for its part an element of love for its object: "Pop Art is more flat and more dry, more serious, more detached, ultimately nihilistic."

As Sontag put it, "there are 'campy' movies, clothes, furniture, popular songs, novels, people, buildings ... " In her wake, two authors have discussed camp in architecture, both making the connection to the work of Venturi and Scott Brown – and by the way both failing to acknowledge Scott Brown's specific contribution in the matter. Firstly, Charles Jencks, in

Modern Movements in Architecture, divided contemporary American architecture into "Camp" and "Non-Camp."⁴ From Sontag, he kept the ideas of aestheticization and depoliticization; then he related camp to formalism and to the proponents of the International Style: Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Philip Johnson. Conversely, Jencks depicted Venturi as a non-camp architect who, although incorporating pop or camp materials, had nothing to do with formalism, and could even be considered "morally hot." Jencks insisted less on camp as a sensibility than as a quality that he associated, for example, with Paul Rudolph's Art and Architecture Building at Yale or Saarinen's TWA terminal – namely, extravagance. With his binary classification, Jencks gave no significance to the irony and second-degree interpretations that Sontag so closely related to camp.

The second author, C. Ray Smith, considered camp in architecture more directly as a matter of sensibility. In *Supermannerism: New Attitudes in Post-Modern Architecture*,⁵ 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: "The situation had gotten so bad by the late 1950s that it could not get worse, it seemed; so it had to get better. But how? 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. This was Camp – at first. "

In *Supermannerism*, Smith refers to the Miami Beach hotels of Morris Lapidus and the Madonna Inn in California by Charles Moore. He gave a prominent role to Venturi, whom he saw as the Andy Warhol of architectural theory. Nonetheless, Smith describes Venturi's writings on Las Vegas as pop, if not camp.

Learning to Like What You Don't Like

With all the flashy casinos and hotels, funny wedding chapels, and glittering giant signs that had sprung up along the Strip, Las Vegas had all it needed to become the mecca of camp. However, few intellectuals granted any importance to the city in the mid-1960s, apart from Tom Wolfe, Reyner Banham, and Denise Scott Brown. Moving to California to take a teaching position at the School of Environmental Design at UC Berkeley, Scott Brown visited Las Vegas as early as 1965. Her background enabled her to take an appreciative approach to the gaudy constructions: firstly, the colorful scenery of the Strip reminded her of South Africa, the country where she had experienced a vibrant vernacular culture in her childhood, namely that of black and white Africans, unduly overshadowed by the aristocratic culture imported from Europe.⁶ Secondly, the Las Vegas signs and billboards reminded her of the New Brutalists she had mingled with in England in the 1950s. As a student at the Architectural Association, she had been fond of the architects Alison and Peter Smithson, who championed ordinariness as a source of inspiration. As she recalled, "... their appeal, I think, lay in combining the Dadaist found-object aesthetic with an interest in community development. For me, this balance was terribly important. I believed, and still believe, 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. The New Brutalism suggested to me that social objectives might be achieved with beauty, if we could only learn to broaden our definition of beauty – and that doing so could make us better artists. "⁷

Through several articles published in the late 1960s, Scott Brown theorized her inclinations that had developed successively in Africa, London, and Las Vegas. She assumed that an "objective," or "neutral," if not benevolent, look at the ordinary landscape of suburban America could bring a new vitality to architecture practice. She added that "... the shiver that is engendered by trying to like what one does not like has long been known to be a creative

one; it rocks the artist from his aesthetic grooves and resensitizes him to the sources of his inspiration. It may be achieved by breaking rules as did the Mannerists This effect might also come from use of a new and shocking source – Le Corbusier's photographs of western grain elevators and tops of ships managed to epater the bourgeois, to blow the minds of the citizens of several continents for several years. "⁸

Scott Brown, who mentioned Antonioni's cinema and illustrates her article "On Pop Art, Permissiveness and Planning" with photographs by Ed Ruscha, enjoined architects to emulate artists and embrace popular culture. She saw it as a major source of inspiration that could rejuvenate architecture, as she explained: "These new, more receptive, ways of seeing the environment, inspired by other sciences and arts, are almost desperately important to architects or planners who hope to stay relevant; and when the artistic fashions move on, we shall still be here because this pop city, this here, is what we have."

Scott Brown's profound interest in the suburban and commercial landscape, awoken in her in Johannesburg, was a sensibility shared by Venturi. Indeed, since his beginnings as an architect he had committed himself to a better consideration of the American context in which he had to design, however unpleasant that context might be. In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, published in 1966, he asked: "Is not Main Street almost all right?" – illustrating this provocative question with a photograph of a typical American commercial street. Scott Brown summed it up afterward: "Our subsequent collaboration has worked because we both bring a rule-breaking outlook to aesthetic – we like the same 'ugly' things – and we both think that rule-breaking should be not willful but based on the demands of reality." In 1966, they went together to Las Vegas, rented a car, and toured the Strip. Scott Brown later reminisced: "We rode around from casino to casino. 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."¹⁰

A Subversive Manifesto

Scott Brown and Venturi shared the disrupting experience of Las Vegas through a series of articles, eventually publishing their controversial book in 1972. I will suggest here that *Learning from Las Vegas* can be read as a striking manifesto of camp sensibility, although it is not entirely explicit. Firstly, the authors considered Las Vegas as a purely visual phenomenon, if not an aesthetic one: "This architecture of styles and signs is antispatial," "it is an architecture of communication over space," and: "The graphic sign in space has become the architecture of this landscape." Henceforth Scott Brown and Venturi's study of the Strip, and more extensively of the commercial boulevard, focused on its more extravagant landmarks. Secondly, the two architects' gaze could be described as camp inasmuch as it seems to be non-committal, depoliticized, and amoral. Both made it clear on several occasions that they should not be questioned about their lack of social commitment, since "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." Resolute in keeping the different concerns apart, they insisted that "the morality of commercial advertising, gambling interests, and the competitive instinct is not at issue here."¹² Thirdly, the second part of *Learning from Las Vegas* sounds literally camp, as its authors playfully juggled with good and bad taste. For instance, in describing the Guild House of 1961, built in Philadelphia: "The technologically unadvanced brick, the oldfashioned, double-hung windows, the pretty materials around the entrance, and the ugly antenna not hidden behind the parapet in the accepted fashion, all are distinctively conventional in image as well as substance or, rather, ugly and ordinary." The design of the facade, however, is cleverly elaborated, full of artifice, and above all deeply ironic. They ultimately confess that "this is what makes Guild House an architect's decorated shed – not architecture without architects."¹³ One could add: this is what makes Scott Brown and Venturi's approach fully camp and not kitsch at all.

Although both maintained that *Learning from Las Vegas* proceeded from an "open-minded and nonjudgmental investigation"¹⁴ and should only be read as an objective analysis of architectural and urban forms, many of its readers did not understand it that way. The book not only represented an outrage against good taste, but immediately came under political siege.¹⁵ Scott Brown and Venturi were accused of giving up social commitment and embracing the values of capitalism and consumerism. Like Martin Pawley or Tomas Maldonado, the historian Kenneth Frampton was a vigorous and pugnacious detractor of Scott Brown and Venturi's writings on Las Vegas. Years after, Frampton despised the fact that "the camp cult of 'the ugly and the ordinary' becomes indistinguishable from the environmental consequences of the market economy." For him, the celebration of commercial and popular architecture contributed to the reinforcement of alienation, maintaining the status quo in American society. On several occasions Scott Brown took the initiative to counter the criticism of those "armchair academics" or "radical chic architects" who patronized her.¹⁷ At the bottom of their dispute lay a questioning of how to be a revolutionary architect in America in the late 1960s.

At this stage, Sontag's assertion that camp sensibility is "disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical" has to be challenged. In fact, camp has always been used to defend marginal cultural and social forms and behaviors. It flourished as a way of opposing mainstream views of normality. For instance, the gay community has used it to confront heterosexuals with their prejudices. As Judith Butler observed, camp has played a significant political role through its capacity to shake up preconceived ideas, to reverse understandings, and to exaggerate¹⁹ the artificiality of what the dominant cultural players perceived as natural. In the same way, Scott Brown and Venturi challenged the architectural norms that take a cathedral into consideration, but not a bicycle shed, as Nikolaus Pevsner famously put it. They undermined modernist orthodoxy by welcoming extravagant roadside constructions – such as the famous Long Island Duck or the Las Vegas Signs – into the architectural repertoire. They did it too by redeeming the suburban home when, after Las Vegas, they learned from Levittown suburban homes with their Yale students. Scott Brown and Venturi showed a new kind of commitment, as cultural stakes were progressively overriding the traditional arguments of class struggle by the end of the 1960s. By questioning the foundation of good taste, they were taking part in a process of democratization that penetrated American society – despite the election and reelection of Richard Nixon, who championed a return to "law and order."

Laughing So As Not to Cry

As a camp manifesto, *Learning from Las Vegas* shows us how architects could be revolutionary in the rising postmodern era. For Scott Brown and Venturi it 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. Andrew Ross notes: "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."¹⁹ Scott Brown followed such a narrow and perilous path, as she never recognized herself in the Marxist rhetoric of the European pundits, but rather identified herself as an American architect who was willing to get her hands dirty. For her, as for Venturi, the camp sensibility was a way of dealing with a political, social, and economic context that was less and less favorable to the production of pure architecture in the 1970s. As Scott Brown put it in an interview in 1975: "The artist, in order to make his art, draws his material from the world around him. If that world suits him, the artist uses it as it is; if not, he (or she) uses it ironically. We believe we use it ironically: we use irony as a way to laugh so we don't cry."²⁰

Scott Brown expressed the melancholy that could be associated with the loss of a better world, but also an awareness that the world we live in can still be enchanting. And to quote the Italian writer Claudio Magris, one might then understand from Scott Brown and Venturi that "disenchantment is an ironic, melancholic and seasoned form of hope."²¹ From today's point of view, their camp sensibility still stands as an invitation to show curiosity, empathy, and wit in the way we look at the built environment and envision its transformation.

1. When asked In 2005, Denise Scott Brown told me that she had not read Susan Sontag, whom I unfortunately did not have the opportunity to meet in the course of my research.
2. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*.
3. Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp.'"
4. Jencks, *Modern Movements In Architecture*, 185.
5. Smith, *Supermannerism*.
6. See Scott Brown, "From Soane to the Strip," 10-16.
7. Scott Brown, "Learning from Brutalism," 204.
8. Scott Brown, "On Pop Art, Permissiveness and Planning."
9. Scott Brown, "Learning from Brutalism," 203.
10. Scott Brown, quoted in Gilbert and Moore, *Particular passions*, 316.
11. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 4.
12. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 0.
13. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 70.
14. This statement is found In the preface of *Learning from Las Vegas*, which is significantly signed by Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi and not the other way round.
15. For an extensive analysis of the heated debate that followed the publication of Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's book between 1968 and 1978, see Didelon, *La controverse Learning from Las Vegas*.
16. Frampton, "Place, Production and Architecture."
17. Scott Brown, "On Architectural Formalism and Social Concern."
18. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
19. Ross, *No Respect*, 146.
20. Von Moos, "lachen, um nicht zu weinen" (laughing so as not to cry).
21. Magris, *Utopie et désenchantement*, 19,