

Archis

Editorial

**Education  
permanente in  
Las Vegas**

Text

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**Education permanente in Las Vegas**

On 21 August, Steve Izenour died. He was the least well-known of the three. What three? The three authors of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the book that changed architecture irrevocably. And Izenour was the one who introduced the subject. While co-author Robert Venturi was still pre-occupied with design criticism in his *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Izenour was already giving lectures about that amazing phenomenon, there in the Nevada desert, that didn't give a damn about the laws of craftsmanship, tradition, canon and aesthetics, but instead commissioned the ultimate in pragmatic architecture. What the public wanted, got built. What had ceased to please, disappeared. Architecture without emotions, but brimming with sentiment. The all-too-human as the ineluctable condition of architecture.

Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour: their contribution to architecture is more relevant than ever before. Indeed, it is only now becoming truly relevant. It is not Venturi's tale about complexity which fuelled the entire era of Modernism criticism, that is the key work; rather it is the study of Las Vegas that turns out in the end to have been the most prescient. The first tale is in fact a closing of accounts intended to create space for the design, the second is a prelude to a world in which the design doesn't count at all. What counts is the effect. If need be with cardboard, if need be for a single evening.

For years, *Learning from Las Vegas*, was seen as a revaluation of American popular culture. As an ode to the taste of the masses. As a product of a receptive attitude to the self-organizing forces of Main Street. For the Izenour et al., the result was still meticulous architectural designs, the production of buildings with a clearly legible signature, with keen attention to space, material and details. The definition of the 'decorated shed' distinguished between sign and signifiant, but it certainly didn't rule out the possibility of a design ideology. On the contrary, the firm's output was defended by the proprietors as the 'right' architecture.

But those who really learn from Las Vegas understand that in the last instance there is no such thing as a right architecture. The lesson of Las Vegas was not its appearance but its method, the Las Vegas method: the absolute interchangeability of form, meaning, effect. And the learning from Las Vegas has only just begun. Izenour and his fellow researchers were often regarded pityingly for their preference for American vernacular. But the lesson is not about style. It is about experiences, and they are by definition short-lived. It is not unusual nowadays to find municipalities joining forces with Walt Disney, Warner Brothers or some local theme park to develop new urban zones. Only now are we seeing housing construction based exclusively on the wild fantasies of the client. In Las Vegas it has always been a case of 'let the money roll', now that applies nearly everywhere. And where the money rolls, architecture is prepared to follow suit.

Even when it all comes crashing down... (see page 128)



### **The lesson of Manhattan**

Whatever may have happened since these words were committed to Microsoft Word, whatever may have been unleashed in the way of rhetoric and actual security measures and retaliation, the world stage is in the grip of fear. No longer the collective fear of power blocks and the ideology of deterrence, as in the Cold War, but the fear that lives now in each individual citizen, so that they are constantly looking over their shoulder and wondering whether they are at risk. This is the fear born of successful terror. Terror, moreover, that is no longer a matter of ultimatums designed to achieve certain aims, such as the release of imprisoned confederates, but purely a matter of sowing death and destruction. Yesterday's means are today's aim.

The new breed of terrorists are no longer interested in letters of safe conduct, do not claim responsibility for attacks, are not interested in the outcome of negotiations. They simply want to be martyrs. Not on an impulse, on the strength of a sudden upwelling of rage. That type of martyr never gets very far. No, the new would-be martyrs spend years making meticulous preparations, working coolly and calculatedly towards their explosive moment of glory. In the meantime they start families, attend classes, make friends and do all the sorts of things that human beings do to make life worthwhile. Yet something inside tells them that this life is irrelevant. In them the instinct to survive has been switched off.

What happened is not a declaration of war or an attack on civilization, not even an exercise of will. And it is most certainly not a religious act. It is a mutation. Firstly because it is based on a transcendence of the biological order. The Japanese kamikazes who attacked Pearl Harbour flew alone, on a strategic mission in the name of the Emperor; the terrorists who hijacked four commercial aircraft full of civilian passengers flew their kerosine bomb not at military opponents and targets but at totally random fellow human beings and buildings of great symbolic significance.

Throughout the old world natural limits applied – to the life of one's own species, the life of one's own family, to one's own life – but these terrorists ignored them all. There was no inner limit, neither material, nor cultural, nor even biological. That is the reality that is still so very hard to comprehend.

And there is another sense in which this terror is a mutation: it spreads insidiously via its victims. The perpetrators of the attacks may be dead, but their cancerous work proliferates. Violence begets violence, and the absence of limits is felt also in the reaction. Aggression has attained a scale that can no longer be tempered by control, vengeance is given free rein and vengeance, too, knows no limits. 'Infinite justice' is no justice, but try explaining that to someone who is seething with rage and a desire for revenge. Thus terror has sown the seeds for a subsequent contagion using legitimate, public means. Fear invokes fear, and the same applies to terror. The price is a security ideology of an unprecedented magnitude and a society that can probably not afford democracy any more.

And architecture? Can it resist the fear, the suspicion, the vengeance? What happens to the organization of space if life, too, has become a vehicle for violent purpose and if aggression replicates like a virus?