

# Just the two of them : on the positions of Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi

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**ON THE  
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DENISE SCOTT  
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**090**

**Brenda Edgar  
Sabine von Fischer**

Sabine von Fischer (svf): On October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012, on the occasion of her 81<sup>st</sup> birthday, Denise Scott Brown gave a lecture at Columbia University. When showing the photographs that she and Robert Venturi took of each other against the distant Las Vegas Skyline in 1966, she pointed out how he had framed her rather carelessly. She, however, had taken care to align his profile with the chimney, the high rise building and the sign in a way to illustrate the parallels of the upright human body and the upright configuration of built structures.

Brenda Edgar (be): Typical of their ironic turn on historical typologies – the age old anthropomorphic metaphor gone ‘honky-tonk’ in Vegas. She did neatly line up Venturi’s head with the chimney. You might wonder though, again, why he has his back turned to the camera. Did she tell him to turn his back to the camera? Or was it Venturi’s own initiative to pose like that?

svf: She must have, the image is completely choreographed: the body crosses the horizon line like a negative space, a dark void in the grey tones of the desert that aligns with the positive volumes of the other buildings and objects along the horizon line. When the conversation between Peter Fischli, Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist touches on the pair of these two photographs, they a) only talk about Venturi, not Scott-Brown. b) Koolhaas says: ‘He is like Hitchcock, inserting himself into his own movies’.<sup>1</sup> However, if he was the director of this, he would have framed her more carefully, like a real movie star. She is completely right in regretting that this widely published image is really a wasted opportunity.

be: I guess it depends on which one of them took the picture first. If Venturi took the first picture, Scott Brown would have had something of a critical advantage, and vice-versa! As far as the cinematographic metaphor goes, one might also compare it to a sort of ‘home movie’ which is pretty emblematic of their inextricably bound personal and professional relationship. In this pair of images, there’s something of the haphazard so cherished by them both: one photo reads like a careful study, while the other is more like a typical vacation (almost honeymoon) snapshot. They did get married after their trip to Las Vegas. The photos, we should also remember, preceded the Yale studio and the book by more than five years. Here we have a sort of diptych for the altar of late 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture, a postmodern Adam and Eve searching for ‘Both-And’ in an anti-Eden, just waiting to bite into that apple.

svf: Is the photograph of her completely accidental then, or anecdotic? Beyond the touristic gaze towards an energetic, even flamboyant young woman (she must have

been 35 then), what is framed? Denise Scott Brown took her initial slides of the Las Vegas strip in April 1965, before she invited Robert Venturi to come with her in November 1966.<sup>2</sup> Did she ask him to take the picture?

be: The photo reminds me of their projects. If you look at their drawings, a lot of them have cut-out figure-ground quality, without any depth, a kind of compressed space.

svf: You could read the relationship of foreground and background as arbitrary, but there is a symmetry in the composition, with the high rise in the center as the axis. In relation to the image content, the symmetry seems to be a purely formal decision.

be: The pictures really sum up their brave search for symbols in the American cultural desert, which brings me back to those thoughts of Frederic Jameson. Here’s the quote:

‘In the wholly built and constructed universe of late capitalism, from which nature has been effectively abolished and in which human praxis – in the degraded form of information, manipulation, and reification – has penetrated the older autonomous spheres of culture and even the Unconscious itself, the Utopia of a renewal of perception has no place to go. It is not clear, to put it crudely and succinctly, why, in an environment of sheer advertising simulacra and images, we should even want to sharpen and renew our perception of those things.’<sup>3</sup>

Jameson goes on to actually name Venturi a few phrases later as an example of such an ‘unacceptable modernism still at work in the various postmodern manifestos’.<sup>4</sup>

svf: Did Jameson acknowledge her role in the partnership? As several scholars have pointed out, it was her contribution to the work that gave it its crucial shift in critical stance. – Maybe I just fantasize that her contribution is acknowledged; the Pritzker Prize went to him alone in 1991. – His position, the fact that he is just a void in the picture, complies with the role of the architect in our culture: not to act as the author, but as the catalyst.

be: I think the one-sided credit to Venturi really comes down to that, to his role as a catalyst and as the author of that seminal work ‘Complexity and Contradiction’, the critical reception of which is still being written today. And of course, architecture always seems to be searching for the Vitruvius of its time....

1 ‘Flâneurs in Automobiles’, in: Stadler, Hilar; Stierli, Martino (eds.): ‘Images from the Archives of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’, Scheidegger & Spiess, 2009. p. 164. see also: Stierli, Martino: ‘Las Vegas im Rückspiegel. Die Stadt in Theorie, Fotografie und Film’. Zürich, 2010.

2 Stierli, Martino in: *ibid.*, p. 13.

3 Jameson, Frederic: ‘Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’. Duke, 1991. pp. 121-122.

4 *Ibid.* p. 122.



*Denise Scott Brown in Las Vegas, November 1966*  
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*Robert Venturi in Las Vegas, November 1966*  
© The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

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