

THE WOMEN'S GAZE

LAS VEGAS: POST-MODERN ARCHITECTURE FOR WOMEN

Denise Scott Brown: the hidden and courageous hand of a woman behind a city born out of nowhere.

by Asia Ruffo di Calabria

Let us move on to the New World, the United States, with another female architect, wife of Robert Venturi: Denise Scott Brown. Her husband is the mastermind of the postmodern current and has questioned the model of the current city with one of his most famous writings: "Learn from Las Vegas". Few people are aware of it, but the text was written with his wife and Steven Izenour and is the result of a study trip of the Venturi couple, at the time both professors at Yale in 1968. But what can we learn from a city built out of nowhere in the middle of the Nevada desert? Can we talk about urban planning for a city born on the commercial "Strip", a straight road that runs endlessly and commercial units overlook it?

The two architects try to give answers, often considered provocative, as they compare Las Vegas to Rome, the eternal city and symbol of antique world: Rome has the square as Las Vegas has the highway. The public space is the parking and the highway. The characteristic of the postmodern city is not architecture, but the luminous signs that have replaced the towers, which designed the skyline of medieval or Renaissance cities. Las Vegas is a Strip where a series of symbolic images struggle and attract society from the dark space: the city is not lived during the day, but at night.

Returning to Rome, the highway is like the Roman Forum, the billboards are like the arches and the advertisements are like Roman bas-reliefs. The architect no longer designs cities, urban plans, but it is the decoration that takes over everything until it becomes totally independent, the protagonist of space and urban structure. According to Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, the design proposal of the future is an industrial structure where the decoration applied on the façade, arouses creativity and communicates messages: the Shed decorated with "I am a monument" transforms the prefabricated metal structure into a daily symbol of postmodernity. For the history of architecture criticism, the two spouses described their geographical and cultural paths towards the vision of pop culture in "Learn from Las Vegas" on Las Vegas Boulevard.

Denise Scott Brown is alive, while her husband disappeared in 2018, after a 50-year marriage. After having met during a course of architect Louis Kahn at the University of Pennsylvania, they always worked together in projects and other books such as "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" two years before their masterpiece on Las Vegas. The Pritzker Prize for Architecture has been awarded to the architect Venturi, with great disappointment of Denise who was not allowed to share this recognition with him. In 2013, the magazine Architectural Review opened a petition asking for the most prestigious architecture award to be assigned to her as well. The official answer of the Pritzker committee arrived as a cold shower: "A subsequent jury cannot resume the work of a previous jury or give a second opinion... Mrs. Scott Brown still remains eligible for the Pritzker Prize." Once again, women's equality is not yet achieved.

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Picture gallery



Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi. © George Pohl, courtesy of VSBA



Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi.

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Denise Scott Brown in Las Vegas 1968