

The New York Times

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January 3, 2010

A View of Modernism Through a Vegas Lens

By [FRED A. BERNSTEIN](#)

IT'S a rare architecture exhibition that can be described as "fun for the whole family." But the current offering at the Yale School of Architecture's gallery deserves the plaudit.

["What We Learned: The Yale Las Vegas Studio and the Work of Venturi Scott Brown and Associates,"](#) which was reviewed in The New York Times on Dec. 23 by Nicolai Ouroussoff, takes a stab at decoding the legacy of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, Philadelphia-based architects known as much for their ideas as for their buildings. Those ideas include referencing pop culture icons, from [Andy Warhol](#) to McDonald's, in otherwise "serious" architecture.

So, along with the expected scale models and drawings, the show includes crowd-pleasers like 17-foot-high golden arches.

Mr. Venturi and Ms. Scott Brown, who have been spouses and partners for more than 40 years, were considered radicals in the 1960s. Back then, architecture schools were in thrall to high modernism — the glass boxes by [Mies van der Rohe](#) and the concrete fortresses by [Paul Rudolph](#), whose handsome building for Yale's architecture school houses this show.

But the couple turned modernism on its head, persuading architects that elements of "low" culture, including neon signs and kitschy, faux-historical details, had a place in their designs for schools, museums and office buildings. They did that, in part, by taking a group of 13 Yale architecture students to Las Vegas in 1968 to study the casinos, parking lots and fast-food restaurants that had flowered in the desert.

The couple found a lot to like amid the visual cacophony of the Strip. The resulting book, "Learning From Las Vegas" (written with Steve Izenour and published in 1972), became one of the most influential design treatises, helping to usher in the period known as postmodernism, in which architects felt comfortable grafting historical details onto otherwise modernist buildings.

Much of the Yale exhibition is devoted to photographs from that trip to Vegas. Here is the world of the Rat Pack, but through the eyes of the Venturis and their protégés. Mounted mostly on the perimeter walls of the gallery, the photographs wrap around a separate exhibition of the couple's architecture.

Among Mr. Venturi's early projects was an apartment building in Philadelphia, called [Guild House](#), that culminated in a large television antenna (where another architect might have placed a chimney or a gable). A replica of the antenna stands in the Yale gallery, along with a facsimile of a cartoonish Ionic column that the Venturis erected at Oberlin College in 1976. "We were terrible and naughty," Mr. Venturi observed on a video playing in a corner of the gallery.

Dean Sakamoto, Yale's director of exhibitions, had the column made for the show; he also retrieved the golden arches and other ephemera from the basement of the couple's office in Philadelphia, along with furniture and tableware designed by Mr. Venturi.

Among the architectural models is a proposed Staten Island Ferry terminal for Lower Manhattan. The first version had a clock as high as a 12-story building to greet arriving ferries. When that design proved unpopular with politicians, [the Venturis and their partners](#) came up with a new design, featuring a vast electronic screen. That proposal, too, was rejected, and the couple resigned from the project in 1996.

Since giving up the ferry terminal, they have completed few important buildings. But their greatest contribution isn't their architecture but their notions about architecture, which are captured by the show, and will make you glad that what happens in Vegas doesn't always stay there.

"What We Learned: The Yale Las Vegas Studio and the Work of Venturi Scott Brown and Associates," through Feb. 5 at the Yale School of Architecture, 180 York Street, New Haven; (203) 432-2288 or architecture.yale.edu/arch_gallery. Admission is free.

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