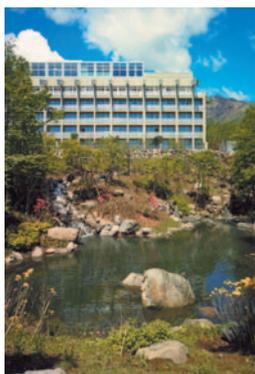


Q+A

SIGNS AND SYSTEMS:

ROBERT VENTURI +
DENISE SCOTT BROWN

WORDS: JESSE ASHLOCK



For nearly 40 years, the husband-and-wife team of architect Robert Venturi and planner/architect Denise Scott Brown has challenged the conventional wisdom of architectural modernism with their projects and theoretical writings. They were praised and reviled for their groundbreaking 1972 monograph *Learning from Las Vegas* (with Steven Izenour), a celebration of the “messy vitality” of roadside signage and symbolically decorated vernacular architecture. Recent projects of their Philadelphia firm, VSBA (established in 1964), have included a resort hotel in Nikko, Japan (pictured), a government center in Toulouse, France, and campus architecture at Princeton, Penn and other American universities. They recently initiated designs for a pair of skyscrapers (their first) in Shanghai, and are working on a new book developed from a lecture series at Harvard, tentatively titled *An Architecture of Signs and Systems*.

Q: YOU HAVE A UNIQUE WORKING RELATIONSHIP. DO YOU DISTINGUISH BETWEEN YOUR SKILLS AND TALENTS?

DSB: I like to say that Bob is a very profound person who's also surprisingly broad, while I'm a very broad person who's surprisingly profound. We've learned to fill in the empty spaces around each other. But as far as ideas are concerned, it's very difficult to tease us apart. **RV:** Another thing that's important is that we work as critics. T.S. Eliot wrote a lot about being a critic when you're being creative and designing.

Q: AS ARCHITECTS, WHAT DO YOU SEE WHEN YOU TRAVEL? DO YOU SEE THE HOMOGENEITY THAT CULTURAL CRITICS DECRY OR THE “MESSY VITALITY” THAT'S SO IMPORTANT TO YOU?

DSB: We used to go to Geneva quite often. It was intriguing to see how McDonald's there used the Roman forum in their ads there. They would never dream of doing that in Philadelphia. As for Starbucks' homogeneity, I heard an African-American architect say you can be sure the Starbucks in Harlem has very different music from the Starbucks in Midtown. Perhaps the invasion of the chains isn't as deadening as we think. We need to look behind the alarmism to what might actually be happening. **RV:** You could also refer to the Starbucks in the Forbidden City in Beijing! **DSB:** People in England love to hate Starbucks, but I was in London last year and I certainly saw a whole lot of people sitting in there. They didn't look terribly un-English either.

Q. WHAT ABOUT THE FLIPSIDE? CAN THE SAMENESS OF THE CHAIN STORES AND THE REST OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT BE DETRIMENTAL?

DSB: We should be alarmed about economic globalism when it breeds economic oppression, but do people think oppression wasn't there before the global economy? **RV:** A year or so ago I was at a conference in Beijing and an Italian-Swiss architect referred disdainfully to the “Americanization of China.” He meant the Pizza Huts and skyscrapers. And I felt like saying, “Well, it's not as bad as the Italianization of Ethiopia.” I think there really is a difference between political and military imperialism and commercial imperialism. When we arrived a while back in Casablanca, we came out of the airport and the first thing we saw was a great big Coca-Cola sign. But there was also, juxtaposed, the local commercialism, which is very vital – and of course you find that in Japan, beautifully. I think those juxtapositions are wonderful, and they show a kind of universality and, let's call it, a *locality*, at the same time, which is appropriate, and that gives tension and dynamism and contrast. **DSB:** In 1977, I went to Iran for a conference of the International Union of Women Architects. At three in the morning, as the plane came in to land, they gave us Coca-Cola. I said, “Look, we Americans may be crazy about Coca-Cola, but we certainly don't drink it for breakfast.” And they said, “Well, we Iranians *do*.”

Q. HAS INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CHANGED YOUR APPROACH TO ARCHITECTURE?

RV: In the book we've just written, I've focused on the use of digital media for an architecture of signs, an architecture of communication, an architecture of the Postindustrial age, i.e. the Electronic age, the Information age. Abstract form in architecture is a relatively recent thing and rather unique to the 20th century. Look at the long tradition of architecture that is not abstract – it's got to be appropriate again for our architecture to acknowledge and engage and accommodate iconography. The two skyscrapers we've proposed in Shanghai are not twisted and dramatically confused, like skyscrapers of today. Ours are essentially generic lofts, very plain, simple, straightforward. Then on the surfaces that don't contain windows are vivid, changing ornamental patterns, and iconography that is both graphic and verbal. These pixelated surfaces are very bright. They can be ornamental and/or information-giving, changing and/or static.

Q. WHAT DO YOU SAY TO PEOPLE WHO INSIST ON CALLING YOU POSTMODERNISTS?

RV: We vomit. It's just a simple misunderstanding.... But very often if you're good, there's a danger of being misunderstood. That's the way it is.

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