

Theory Follows Photography: The Evolving Gaze of Denise Scott Brown

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Abstract

Throughout history, architects have communicated their ideas through writing, drawing, model-making, speculation, and built work. Photography, which appeared in architecture books at the beginning of the 20th century, was mostly considered to be ancillary to the written word. A recent exhibition of photographs by Denise Scott Brown at Tyler School of Art and Architecture in Philadelphia during summer 2021 demonstrates the possibility of another creative and intellectual path for the medium. Photography simultaneously serves as a precedent and catalyst for architectural and urban thinking and theory. This article aims to examine the relationship and continuity between Scott Brown's photographs and the ideas that she conveyed in essays and books. Photography, therefore, becomes the catalyst for writings that integrate disparate topics, such as anthropology, vernaculars, history, and Pop Art, as the iconology of Las Vegas and the changing urban landscape of Philadelphia. Embodying a new creative paradigm, Scott Brown's photography anticipates theory.

Keywords: photography, exhibition, architectural theory, Mannerism, Pop Art

Part I: Antecedents

A question often discussed by architects, critics, and historians is how the world we live in influences the formation of new architectural ideas and theories. Throughout history, a rite of passage for many architects was to travel to faraway places with the prospect of learning from the experience of sketching, measuring, and documenting buildings, urban spaces, and landscapes. The premise was that the simple act of drawing would foster the development of new perspectives on architecture and place.

An architect who became well-known for developing many of his ideas and theories while travelling was Le Corbusier. In 1911 and only 24 years old, Le Corbusier (still using his birth name Charles-Édouard Jeanneret) travelled to Italy, Greece, Serbia, and Turkey, a chronicle later published in his book *Voyage to the East* (Le Corbusier, 1987). Throughout the journey, the young Le Corbusier sketched everything that caught his attention: from ships to ceramic vases and ancient buildings, including the Süleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul and the Parthenon in Athens (Figure 1). Le Corbusier's practice of sketching, drawing, and documenting his experiences propelled his intellectual and theoretical evolution. It should be noted that two years after returning from his trip, in 1914, Le Corbusier developed the *Maison Domino*, the most eloquent ideogram of modern architecture.

Figure 1
Drawing of the
Parthenon by
Charles-Édouard
Jeanneret (later
known as Le
Corbusier), 1911
(Image courtesy
of Le Corbusier
Foundation)



We identify a similar process in the case of Alvar Alto; his various trips to Greece and Italy greatly influenced his architecture. Architectural critic Göran Schildt argued that Aalto's sketches "performed a truly central role in his creative process" (Schildt, 1978, p. xi). Among the most well-known examples of travelling impacting an architect's career is the life of Louis Kahn. After visiting and drawing the ruins of Egypt and Greece, Kahn returned to Philadelphia to develop radically different architectural concepts and projects from what he was producing prior to his European experience (Merrill, 2021).

The 20th century was an era of great technological inventions and changes that strongly influenced art and design. One of the thinkers who best portrayed the impact of new technologies in art was Walter Benjamin, who stated that "for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" (Benjamin, 1935/1968, p. 224). In other words, Benjamin argued that artistic creation and representation no longer depended on handmade production. The book *Unexpected Affinities* discusses the evolving and conflicting correspondences between artistic conception and production, arguing that Marcel Duchamp's readymade radically challenged the most entrenched attributes of what (traditionally and conventionally) constituted a work of art, including questions such as authorship, originality, and handmade production (Meninato, 2018).

What Benjamin argued and Duchamp demonstrated with the inauguration of conceptual art was the possibility of relinquishing the inevitability of handmade production for creating and representing art. Translated into architecture, the emergence of new mechanical-recording processes, such as photography and cinema, allowed new possibilities for understanding and documenting the built and natural environment. Considering these precedents, it is not surprising that a new generation of architects would look into new mechanisms for documenting and analysing reality. That is the case of Denise Scott Brown, for whom I identify a clear and direct relationship between the use of photography and her evolution as an architect and thinker.

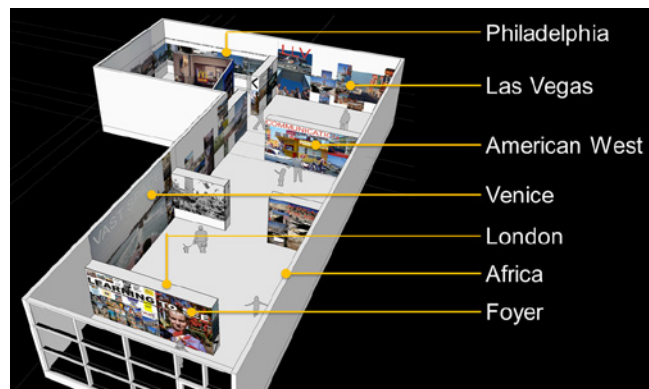
Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi are among the most influential architects and thinkers of the second half of the 20th century. Their writings, including the seminal books *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (Venturi, 1966) and *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Venturi et al., 1972), have intensely influenced architectural thought. The built work of their firm Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates (VSBA) of Philadelphia has had a similarly significant impact. Their projects can be understood as continuously bridging theory and building through an original understanding of history and the impact of 'ordinary' and everyday objects that define our built environment.

Part II: The Exhibition

During the spring and summer of 2021, Temple Contemporary, an art-driven multipurpose space associated with Temple University's Tyler School of Art and Architecture in Philadelphia, organised an exhibition of Denise Scott Brown's photographs. The exhibit (see list of team members in Acknowledgements) exposed the intimate and

direct relationship between the photographs Scott Brown took for almost five decades and her evolution as an architect and thinker. As illustrated in the diagram (Figure 2), the show was conceived as an approximate chronological excursion of the photographs Denise took at various moments of her life. Listed from the bottom-up, the tour begins with Africa, then moves on to London, Venice, the American West, Las Vegas, and finally, Philadelphia.

Figure 2
Diagram of exhibition
(Image by Noa Mailar
& Carolina Vaccaro)



The first room is dedicated to Africa. It should be noted that Denise was born in Rhodesia and lived in South Africa until her early 20s. Here, the exhibition offers the first surprise, which is to imagine a very young architectural student during the late 1940s, at the height of the International Style, who, instead of showing interest in modern buildings, was drawn to vernacular structures, indigenous rituals, and self-construction processes (Figure 3). In the early 1950s, Denise went to England, which forms the focus of the second room (Figure 4). The purpose of her move was to pursue graduate studies at the Architectural Association. In London, she discovered a city rapidly leaving behind the post-war period, a town taken over by a new generation of artists, architects, and thinkers. Denise's London is a city of contrasts. On the one hand, she was developing a strong interest in English Mannerist architects, such as Inigo Jones, John Nash, and John Soane. On the other, she was getting to know young contemporary architects such as Alison and Peter Smithson. In addition, she experienced a peculiar cultural phenomenon, the emergence of movements such as Pop Art and Rock and Roll. While at the Architectural Association, Denise attended a summer program in Venice, a city that would become extremely influential in her career. In Venice, she developed the idea that a city is not only composed of buildings but also of public spaces and how people activate those spaces (Figure 5).



Figure 3
Africa room
(Photograph
by author)



Figure 4
London room
(Photograph
by author)



Figure 5
Venice room
(Photograph
by author)

In 1958, Denise Scott Brown moved to the US, where she completed her master's degree in urban planning at the University of Pennsylvania. In Philadelphia, she met her lifelong professional and sentimental partner, Robert Venturi. After graduating, she accepted a teaching position at UC Berkeley in California. The *American West* room (Figure 6) can be interpreted as the moment when Denise 'discovers America,' or it should be said, the American West. It is already the 1960s; the country is breathing a different air. For Scott Brown, the American West is the ultimate metaphor for the country, the locus of contrasting juxtapositions: the desert and the highway, the gas station and the road chapel, and the sublime vastness of the infinite horizon.

Figure 6
American West room
 (Photograph
 by author)



The next stop is Las Vegas, a city Denise went to first by herself and later with Robert Venturi (Figure 7). The posterior development is quite well known. In 1968, Venturi and Scott Brown, together with architectural students from Yale University, made Las Vegas the object of their study. The basis of that experience would later become the book *Learning from Las Vegas*, which will be discussed later. The last room is like a Russian doll, a room within a room. The outer one is dedicated to Philadelphia, what would become Scott Brown and Venturi's home, their place in the world. Philadelphia was, and in many ways still is, a city of contrasts—where postindustrial structures coexist alongside some of America's earliest and most symbolic buildings. It must be borne in mind that Denise Scott Brown is not from Philadelphia, so in many ways, she 'discovers' the city; she sees it with fresh eyes. At moments she seems like a documentarian, recording how the city is changing and being transformed. One of the photos was taken from I. M. Pei's Society Hill Towers (where Venturi and Scott Brown used to live), showing the demolition of countless city blocks to allow the construction of the I-95 highway bordering the Delaware River.

Figure 7
Las Vegas room
 (Photograph
 by author)



Inside the *Philadelphia* room, there is an aedicule, or a room within a room, dedicated to *Domesticity*. It has photos of Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi's home in Chestnut Hill, and of what was for various decades their office on Main Street in Manayunk, a neighbourhood

in the Northeast area of Philadelphia. The capture (Figure 8) shows two hypnotic patterns designed by VSBA and a photograph by Scott Brown of their home that seems like a *trompe l'oeil*, or a superscale collage, with a procession of layered spaces, artworks of different time periods, and an assemblage of furniture of different styles, including a chair of their own design.



Figure 8
Domesticity room
(Photograph
by author)

Part III: Learning to See

The previous section offered a very brief overview of the exhibition. A fascinating aspect is that it exposed the relationship and continuity between Scott Brown's photographs and the ideas conveyed in her essays, books, and architectural and urban projects. In other words, when *theory follows photography*.

Learning to see: Mannerism

An example of this correlation is her photo of a detail of an English Mannerist building taken in the late 1950s in London (Figure 9). It is well known that much of Scott Brown's writings and designs that she later developed with Robert Venturi were influenced by Mannerism. Recalling this period of her life, she states,

From a very young age I have been attracted by opposites, by what Soane would have seen as mannerism – by tensions between urban and rural, modern and traditional, Western and African, sectional (Jewish, Italian, American) and of the whole world. These competing tensions have in many ways fueled my creativity and defined my understanding of architecture. (Scott Brown & Weaver, 2019, p. 12)

Figure 9
Detail of an English
Mannerist building
(Photograph by
Denise Scott Brown)



Figure 10
VSBA, Sainsbury
Wing, National
Gallery, London, 1991
(Photograph by VSBA
and Matt Wargo)



Mannerism would become one of the influences and recurring topics of Venturi and Scott Brown's trajectory and the main subject of their book *A View from the Campidoglio* (Venturi & Scott Brown, 1984). Their book is a remarkable recompilation of a stylistic moment that, in Venturi and Scott Brown's view, transcends geography and time periods. The influence of Mannerism also transpires in one of their

most well-known buildings, the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London (1991). Envisioned as an addition, the Sainsbury Wing is simultaneously paying homage to and 'speaking with' the original building by William Wilkins (1832–38), while proposing a dialogue with Classical London and with the history of architecture in general. Facing Trafalgar Square, the façade reminds of many Mannerist buildings, such as the Porta Pia by Michelangelo in Rome (1565) and Giulio Romano's Palazzo del Te in Mantova (1534). These historical references are particularly evident in the disposition of the pilasters, relentlessly juxtaposing, intersecting, and overlapping—creating a scene that is both familiar and surprising. The interior staircase (Figure 10) is an exercise of layering and amalgamation, where the interior is in dialogue with the exterior, a curtain wall coexists with classical forms, plastered walls embrace an enfilade of metallic arches, and a delicate 'billboard' is disposed along an abstract cornice. The space is simultaneously familiar and unexpected.

Learning to see: Pop

Another avenue Denise anticipates in her photographs is 'Pop.' It is interesting to note that she does not restrict the discussion to Pop Art, but she also discusses the Pop landscape, Pop iconology, and the Pop scene. In her 1971 seminal essay, *Learning from Pop*, she discusses the possibilities of Pop architecture and a Pop environment. She states, "the Pop landscape differs from earlier models in that it is also the place where we build; it is OUR context" (Scott Brown, 1971/2000, p. 64). Her first exposure to the Pop scene was in London, where she witnessed the emergence of pioneering artists such as Richard Hamilton, whose 1956 collage, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different and So Appealing*, marks the beginning of Pop Art (Figure 11, left). It is interesting to note that while English Pop Art was more about collage, and in many ways informed by the 1930s European surrealists, when transported to America, Pop Art became more iconic and monumental, as exemplified in the works by Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg (Figure 11, right).

Venturi and Scott Brown are more aligned with the American iconic and monumental version of Pop Art, which is translated into architecture in many of their projects, such as their *Ironic Column* (also known as 'Mickey Mouse column') at the Oberlin Museum of Art (Figure 12), and the competition entry titled *The Big Apple at Times Square* (Figure 13). In the book *Architecture as Signs and Systems for a Mannerist Time*, they write, "Pop Art celebrates the Ordinary . . . with its depictions of everyday objects made special via modifications of medium, scale, and context" (Venturi & Scott Brown, 2004, p. 39). Reflecting on these projects, we see back-and-forth

movement between photographs and words or between images and ideas. Discussing their proposal for Times Square, they describe the gigantic 'apple' to be placed in the heart of New York City as a continuing dialogue with Claes Oldenburg's large-scale sculptures:

A piece of representational sculpture which is bold in form yet rich in symbolism . . . realism with a diversity of association. It is popular and esoteric—a Big Apple symbolizing New York City and a surrealist object evoking Rene Magritte or a Pop-art monument in the manner of Claes Oldenburg. (VSBA, 1984)

Figure 11
*Just What Is It That
 Makes Today's Home
 So Different and So
 Appealing*, 1956
 (Image by Richard
 Hamilton, Wikiart)
 (left); *Campbell's Soup
 Can*, 1964 (Image by
 Andy Warhol,
 Wikiart) (right)



Figure 12
 VSBA, *Ironic Column*,
 Allen Memorial Art
 Museum, Oberlin
 College, 1976
 (Photograph by VSBA)





Figure 13
 VSBA, *The Big Apple*
 at Times Square, 1984
 (Photograph by VSBA)

Learning to see: Las Vegas

As mentioned earlier, Las Vegas was a turning point for the careers of Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi. With their research, they demonstrated that the commercial strip, signage, billboards, rich symbolism, and the urban space experienced by the movement of the car was a new and unprecedented urban phenomenon that should be analysed as such. In this regard, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour write, "We believe a careful documentation and analysis of the commercial strip is as important to architects and urbanists today as were the studies of medieval Europe and ancient Greece to earlier generations" (Venturi et al., 1972, p. 64). Once again, Denise Scott Brown's photographs, some taken on previous trips, anticipate a new gaze and a new understanding of the contemporary city (Figure 14).



Figure 14
Architettura Minore on
The Strip, Las Vegas,
 1965 (Photograph by
 Denise Scott Brown)

What started as a design studio at Yale University culminated with one of the most influential architectural books of the 20th century (Figure 15). In a captivating and often-quoted introduction, *Learning*

from *Las Vegas* begins by stating, "Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect," later adding, "This is a way of learning from everything" (Venturi et al., 1972, p. 3). For Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, rather than a model to be imitated, Las Vegas was a new urban paradigm that needed to be examined, analysed, and understood, affirming their belief that "a careful documentation and analysis of the commercial strip is as important to architects and urbanists today as were the studies of medieval Europe and ancient Greece to earlier generations" (Venturi et al., 1972, p. xi).

Figure 15
Photos taken during
Yale University's Las
Vegas studio, 1968
(Photographs by
Denise Scott Brown)



Learning to see: Social lenses, from South Philadelphia to Africa

A lesser-known aspect of Scott Brown's career is her work as an advocate for social causes. In 1968, Philadelphia had the plan to demolish the blocks adjacent to South Street in order to build a crosstown elevated highway. This would have been a tragedy for South Philadelphia, cutting a neighbourhood in half and disrupting a black community forever. When confronted with such a problematic proposal, the leaders and planners of the City Planning Commission spoke vaguely about "undesirable land usage to the south" of the city (Tenenbaum, 2020, para. 3). Confronting such a prejudiced opinion, Scott Brown developed a photographic survey of South Street, demonstrating that the urban corridor was a thriving district packed with all kinds of stores and businesses, including diners, cigar shops, beauty salons, mini markets, barbershops, and thrift stores (Figure 16). All this active and energetic urban life, which the planners and architects at the City Planning Commission simply could not see, was captured by the social sensibility of Denise's lenses. By 1973, the City Planning Commission reversed course and abandoned the crosstown elevated highway project. Since then, South Street has remained one of the liveliest streets in Philadelphia.

For many visitors, the most surprising moment of the exhibition was the room dedicated to Africa. It is important to note that it was in Rhodesia and South Africa where Denise spent her youth and

completed her undergraduate studies in architecture. It is fascinating to see how at such an early age, she became interested in vernacular and indigenous constructions, rituals, and traditions, and the living conditions of the population of Soweto, which would become one of the largest shantytowns in Africa (Figure 17). Scott Brown's photos capture an aspect of the built environment that modern architects and urbanists failed to see: that of the informal settlements. It should be noted that, nowadays, one out of seven people in the world live in informal settlements, and yet very few architects and designers consider the subject worthy of attention. Denise's youthful sensibility can be summarised in her words,

I photographed Soweto and admired the ingenuity of people who built squatter housing. These unplanned areas, with houses put together from scraps and discards, seemed more in line with housing realities than architect-designed low-income solutions. (Scott Brown & Weaver, 2018, p. 23)



Figure 16
Photographic survey
of South Street,
1961–67 (Photographs
by Denise Scott Brown)



Figure 17
Photos of Africa, 1950s
(Photographs by
Denise Scott Brown)

Learning to see: Japan

In 1992, Venturi and Scott Brown received a commission to develop an architectural project in Japan. Rather than looking for inspiration in the traditional temples and gardens of Kyoto, which had been intensively worshipped and promoted by Modern architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, Bruno Taut, Venturi and Scott Brown assumed an understanding of the architecture of Japan by

documenting the vibrant streets and markets of Tokyo.¹ Instead of the minimalist, austere, monochrome, and Zen aesthetic which inspired generations of modern architects, Venturi and Scott Brown became fascinated with the colourful richness of Japanese supergraphics, video games, everyday objects, miniature comics masks, neon signs, LED screens, and vibrant clothing. Photographs in Figure 18 are just a few of the hundreds of photographs taken by Denise in Japan, in many ways anticipating the iconographic vocabulary mastered in their design.

Figure 18
Photos of Japan, 1992
(Photographs by
Denise Scott Brown)



The Nikko Hotel and Resort Complex demonstrates the possibility of contemporary architecture inspired by popular and everyday Japanese culture initially captured, analysed, studied, and extrapolated from the photographs taken by Denise Scott Brown. The design of the Complex corroborates the impact of the visual anthropology fieldwork carried out by Scott Brown. The main atrium is covered with metal trusses and glazed panels to allow natural light. On the sides, attached to the columns, two-dimensional panels feature super-scaled fuchsia, red, and yellow flowers, along with robotic images reminiscent of Pokémon and Dragon Ball. Commenting on how Japanese culture informed their design, Venturi and Scott Brown write, "We treated the hotel lobby and café access area as a Japanese rural village street, designing flattened representations of the plastic or paper flowers and lanterns found on such streets" (Venturi & Scott Brown, 2004, p. 209). The sequence suggests a scenographic montage drawn from popular culture where traditional paper lamps, typical mailboxes, and public telephones suggest allusions to everyday contemporary Japanese iconography (Figure 19). Within this design process, the camera becomes an instrument for accumulating knowledge; it constitutes the first step for developing architectural ideas and theories, which will, in turn, influence and inform the architectural project.

¹ Reflecting on the influence of Japanese popular culture in the development of their architectural ideas and practice, Venturi and Scott Brown (2004) state, "exemplified in the temples and gardens in Kyoto and worshipped and promoted by Modernist theorists of the last century, but also the markets and the everyday culture" (p. 93).



Figure 19
 VSBA, Mielparque
 Nikko Resort
 Complex, 1997
 (Photograph by VSBA)

Conclusion

Scott's Brown use of the camera can be understood as an instrument for identifying and framing visual, iconographic, and sensory references that will serve as a point of departure for constructing design theories and practices. Just as Le Corbusier revolutionised 20th-century architecture by considering the iconography of automobiles, ships, and silos as paradigms of the world to come, more than half a century later, Scott Brown and Venturi proposed a fresh and revitalised gaze of the contemporary built and natural environment. This attitude, which Denise Scott Brown condensed with the expression 'learning from everything,' sums up the relationship between photography and a theory of architecture in general. Following the publication of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the expression 'learning from...' became permanently associated with Venturi and Scott Brown. Critic and historian Beatriz Colomina has listed the vast number of books and articles by Scott Brown and Venturi—as well as by many other authors—that begin with those words, among them, "Learning from Levittown," "Learning from Pop," "Learning from Lutyens," and "Learning from Aalto" (Colomina, 2020, p. 213). By highlighting the action of the verb 'learning,' Scott Brown and Venturi established a sort of 'pact' with the reader; they announce that the objective is not to impose a manifesto, or an irrefutable dogma, but rather an invitation to reflect on the fluid and changing condition of the built environment.

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