

Urban analyses by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown

The topicality of Postmodernism

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Introduction

Before Rem Koolhaas went to Las Vegas with his Harvard students, he visited his precursors Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, who had gone there with a group of students around thirty years earlier. The publication of the research performed there, *Learning from Las Vegas*,¹ had become an immediate hit.

The aim of their trip to Las Vegas was to study 'a new type of urban form, that, from ignorance, we define today as urban sprawl, to come to understand this new form and to begin to evolve techniques for its handling'. In fact, in the view of Venturi and Scott Brown, this city 'which just grew' also counterpoised 'the deadness that results from too much tastefulness and total design', by which they meant the kind of environment that modernist post-war urban development had produced.

Learning from Las Vegas was primarily controversial due to its object: a banal environment from the periphery of the profession functioning as an example, the present situation as the starting point for the future.

Scott Brown once described the process of urban development as follows: 'Urban order derives, at least in part, from the fact that many people make similar decisions. From these decisions, and in relation to topography and geometry, patterns evolve. Urban designers had better understand these patterns. They should see the patterns that derive from social and economic forces as their muse, and should use rather than negate these forces.'² In order to be able to work in the city, which is thus regarded as a complex and dynamic process, it is necessary to study the object first. This is the subject matter of *Learning from Las Vegas* and consequently the Yale studio's subtitle was *Form Analysis as Design Research*.

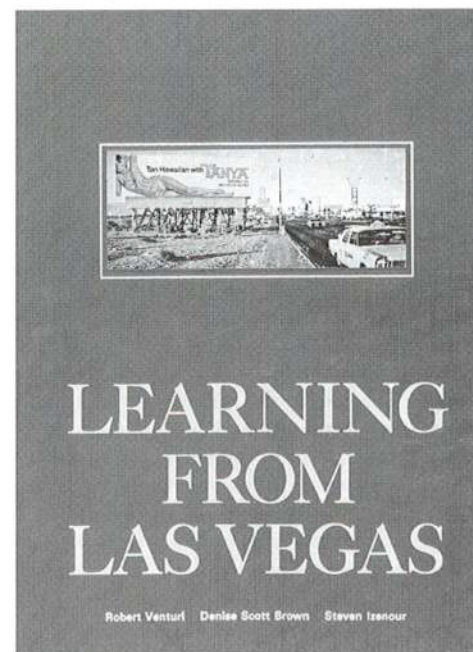
Other parallels can also be drawn between Venturi and Scott Brown's studios in the 1960s and 1970s with regard to banal, day-to-day cities like Las Vegas and Levittown, and the Harvard Design School *Projects on the City*, that are supervised by Rem Koolhaas. One of these is the shared distrust of professional planning practice and a preference for the rawness of the uncontrived.³

Koolhaas included an extensive interview with Venturi and Scott Brown in *Project on the City*, vol. 2,⁴ which takes a statement from *Learning from Las Vegas* as its motto: 'Learning from the existing landscape is a way for the architect to be revolutionary'.

One conclusion from *Learning from Las Vegas* seems to include an intrinsic contradistinction expressed by Venturi and Scott Brown in the one-liner *Symbol in Space before Form in Space*, which has consistently been taken to be the central issue of the study. The billboard dominates The Strip and architecture is pushed into the background. This distinction has led to many interpretations, such as 'architecture is dead' or 'the façade is independent of the contents and therefore autonomous'.

Referring to such statements, Koolhaas raises the issue of 'form' during the interview. According to Koolhaas, Las Vegas, as a modern city in 2000, has become 'a real city' due to the pure mass of the buildings, in which every 'message' is undermined by the scale of the objects. Moreover, he observes that the issue of sculpture is more relevant than a retreating (neutral) architecture. 'Whole cities are being placed on the map by architects who are busy creating sculptures,' says Koolhaas, undoubtedly referring to the success of Bilbao due to Gehry's Guggenheim Museum.⁵ Is the statement that the symbol precedes the form still valid?

Venturi and Scott Brown often described their architecture as a *generic box with added decoration*. Such statements, just like the one on the symbol and the form, are primarily a reaction to post-war Brutalist architecture's desire for form, as created by Paul Rudolph in America. A fascinating comparison between the Guild House (by Venturi and Scott Brown) and Crawford Manor (by the architect Paul Rudolph) has been included in *Learning from Las Vegas*, as well as comparison between *urban sprawl* and *megastructure* where the terms *ugly and common* (urban sprawl) are used opposite *heroic and original* (megastructures).



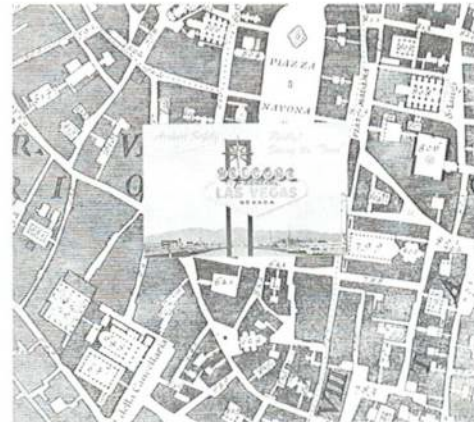
First edition, hardcover, 1972



Signs of Life



The Strip



Collage of Nolli map and welcome sign

In my view, the statement '*Symbol in Space before Form in Space*' means that, in the city, it is not the form of the architecture that is the most important but the iconography. It is a plea for discursive architecture that can be commonly understood and that has a meaning within its context. Accordingly, *Learning from Las Vegas* is a quest for a visual language and symbolism in the city. This study, which was part of the research on the imagery and symbolism of mass culture, was continued in later studies, on Levittown for example, and in the *Signs of Life: Symbol in the American City* exhibition.⁶ The research into the language, into a common architectonic language, was a shared theme in post-modern movements.⁷ Here, Venturi and Scott Brown's explicit interest lay in establishing a connection between architecture and means of mass communication.

Another argument can be advanced to place this well-known one-liner from *Learning from Las Vegas* in due perspective. The observations made in *Learning from Las Vegas* concerned the space on The Strip, where the casinos towered above infinite parking lots, anchored by means of the well-known impressive advertising pillars. The Las Vegas of the sixties was the platform of an economic and an urban development success story. In the words of Scott Brown, Las Vegas was the place to go (*the people voted with their feet*). However, real-life practice, with which the office itself was concerned, was actually the opposite of an energetic city. In the seventies and eighties, Venturi and Scott Brown were frequently commissioned to formulate urban redevelopment plans, which largely concerned disintegrating inner cities, which was also the major brief in Europe. The situation had often been worsened by the rigorous modernist expansions of the

fifties and sixties. In addition, this often involved the urban *grid* that characterises American cities, although this is not comparable with the public space in European cities that is determined by architectonic façades. Here the urban form cannot be described as 'urban sprawl' similar to the 'new type of urban form' of Las Vegas. Thus, the analysis of retreating architecture making way for other non-architectonic elements is less valid.

In fact, the striking element in these redevelopment plans is the drive with which an attempt is made to strengthen the delineation of public space – often the linear area of a main street or boulevard – by reinforcing the façades (see also the plans for Austin and Miami).⁸

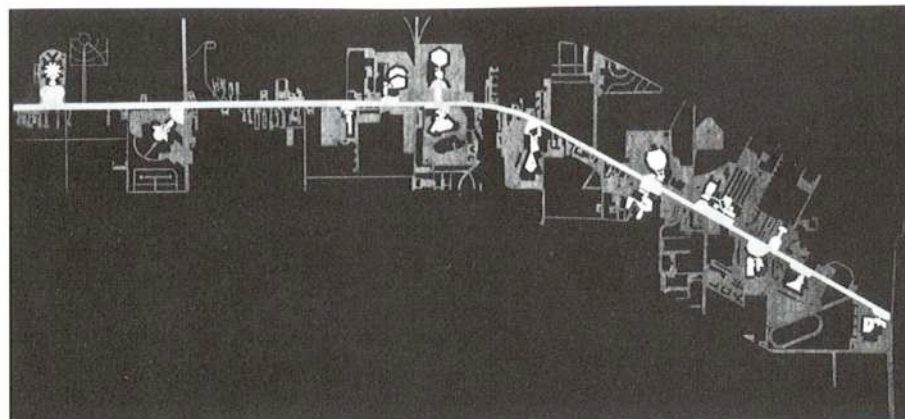
In the work of Venturi and Scott Brown, the position of the façade, as either a contextual element or an autonomous surface (and often both), is a continuous object of interpretation. (For example, compare the extreme proposal for the billboard façade of the *Football Hall of Fame* with the contextual façade of the *National Gallery* extension in London.)

However, it is fundamentally the methodology of the urban research outlined in *Learning from Las Vegas* that had a great influence. Urban research and the development of methods for urban research occupied an important place from the sixties onwards, also in the other previously mentioned post-modern movements.

In the work of Venturi and Scott Brown, the method of analysis, criticism and design is consistently and explicitly a matter for discussion. This was already clearly demonstrated in Venturi's first book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*,⁹ which was presented as a method of criticism, especially in the Introduction. Here, Venturi referred to T.S. Eliot's essays on tradition, criticism and analysis in poetry.¹⁰ Following on from Eliot's literary work, Venturi's book is an attempt to come to terms with architectural tradition. Venturi analyses and compares an extensive repertoire of examples from architectural history. He compiles a lexicon of the discipline, as it were, in which the point at issue is the effect of architecture on the spectator or the significance of the composition. Venturi specifically mentions Comparative Analysis as a method of architectural criticism, which goes back to art-historical techniques. According to Koolhaas, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* was the last architectural treatise – an analysis of architectural composition and its significance based on examples of buildings: a manifesto for complexity and contradiction in architecture in contrast to the abstract expressionism of the post-war Modernists. From the sixties onwards, however, architecture has been discussed within the context of the city, and the city is the basic topic of *Learning from Las Vegas*, although the subtitle is 'The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form'.

DIRECTIONAL SPACE			
SPACE · SCALE	SPEED	SYMBOL	
direction 100, 500, 1000, 1500, 2000, 2500, 3000, 3500, 4000, 4500, 5000, 5500, 6000, 6500, 7000, 7500, 8000, 8500, 9000, 9500, 10000			
EASTERN BAZAAR		3 MPH	
MEDIEVAL STREET		3 MPH	
MAIN STREET		15 MPH	
COMMERCIAL STRIP		30 MPH	
THE STRIP		35 MPH	
SHOPPING CENTER		3 MPH	
SPACE · SCALE · SPEED · SYMBOL			

Directional Space Analysis



Nolli map of Las Vegas

Methods of urban analysis in Learning from Las Vegas

In *Learning from Las Vegas* the city is regarded as a layered structure of interactive subsystems. In this, architecture ought to be regarded in the context of social, economic, and cultural influences. Architecture is not an autonomous issue. The study explores an enormous amount of different techniques that are used to describe the various layers of the city. The impressive quantity and diversity is particularly prominent in the first edition, published in A3 format. The book is an explicit study of techniques to record observations in maps and diagrams. Also in this, the book is a precursor of the media bombardment that generated from, for example, the Harvard Design School *Projects on the City*.

The presentation includes photographic and film sequences: the 'Ruscha' front façade series on The Strip and also maps that present the *Comparable activity patterns*, displaying all the Car-hire companies or all the wedding chapels. There is a map showing the *intensity of the levels of illumination on The Strip*.

The *Map of Las Vegas' Heraldic Symbolism* encodes the significance-bearing layer of the city, and is not without reason the first map in the book (although omitted from later editions) because it captures the central theme of the study: the city as a communication system. At first, it appears to be a morphological representation, but it encodes the buildings and urban elements as significance-bearers in two specific ways: meaningful through 'added symbolism' (orange) or 'architectural expression' (pink).

The introduction of the 'Nolli mapping technique' is extremely significant. The map that Nolli drew of the baroque pilgrim city of Rome in 1748 had great influence on the perception of the city.¹¹ The essence of Nolli's

cartography was that, in these first two-dimensional maps, he emphasised the open space in the city, not the buildings. He even drew some buildings as public space, such as churches that were stopping places for pilgrims. Nolli could do that by drawing the majority of the buildings as an undifferentiated mass (shaded black: the 'poché' of the city) so that the public space is indicated by white recesses. Venturi and Scott Brown repeatedly applied this same technique in their later work.

A fragment of this Nolli map is printed in *Learning from Las Vegas*, with the city's *Welcome* advertising pillar inserted in it. The message is clear: advertising and billboards are the signs, the means of communication of Las Vegas, replacing the position and the form of the buildings in Rome. The *Nolli map of Las Vegas* presents the public space of Las Vegas – the gambling halls on The Strip – as beads on a string, along with the other specifically American public space, the parking lot. On the *Nolli map of Fremont Street*, the confrontation between the architecturally determined public space of Rome and the symbolically signified space of Las Vegas is intensified: what the columns signify in the one is represented by the rows of gaming machines in the other.

The previously mentioned *Comparative Analysis* here results in some of the most informative diagrams. Different types of public space from all ages are compared to one another, in relation to the accompanying buildings. These analyses clearly illustrate a specific distinction between the different types of urban space – as is most convincingly expressed in the *Directional Space Analysis*. Here, a comparison is drawn between the linear areas in the eastern bazaar, the medieval street, the main street, the commercial shopping boulevard

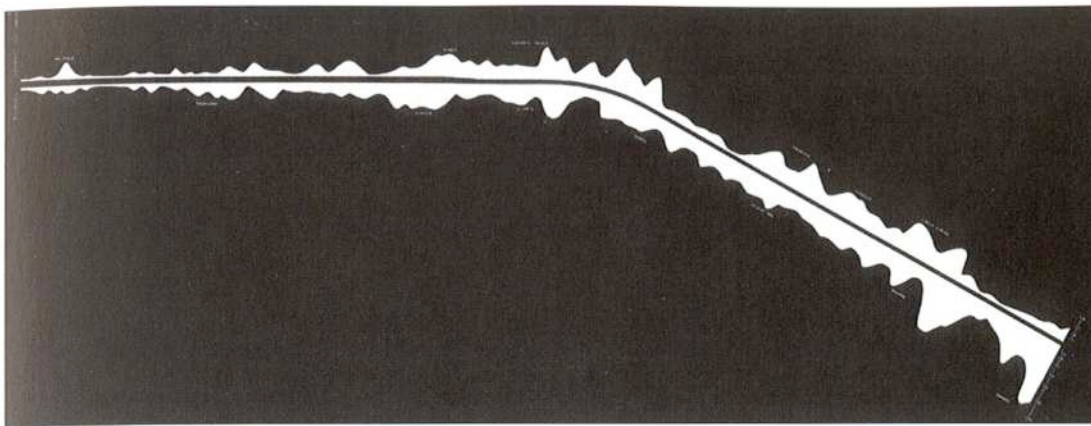
(The Strip), etc. with respect to the pace of the visitor and the kinds of communication used. Evolution runs from direct contact, literally being able to touch the wares in an eastern bazaar, towards increasingly indirect contact – driving past The Strip at a speed of 40 miles per hour – in which the significance of symbolism gradually becomes more important.

In other words, on The Strip, the meaningful layer has detached itself from the buildings to become a stand-alone billboard: *Symbol in Space before Form in Space*. In this urban space, which is not defined by façades and is called 'urban sprawl' for the lack of a better term, architecture retreats in favour of other non-architectural elements that function as vehicles of communication instead.

Urban plans

The urban redevelopment plans for *Jim Thorpe*, *Miami*, *Memphis*, and *Austin*, among others, stand out in terms of their versatile and expressive manner of urban research.

I have discussed the urban research on Austin in more detail in a different article, along with the way in which this research is effectuated in the urban development design. In this plan, the development of a new semi-public space within the American urban grid is particularly interesting. In contrast to the erosion of the traditional street on account of the increasing claims upon it (by traffic among others), a secondary system of semi-public spaces is grafted onto the original grid. The development of this type of new urban space is a recurring theme in the work of Venturi and Scott Brown, leading to the characteristic *Internal street* in later buildings.¹²

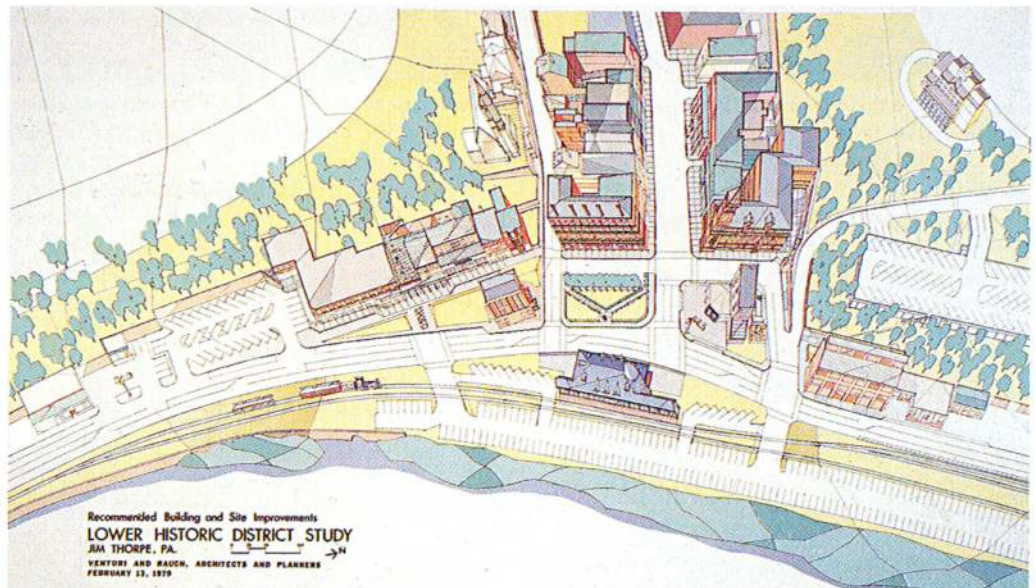


Map of the illumination levels on The Strip

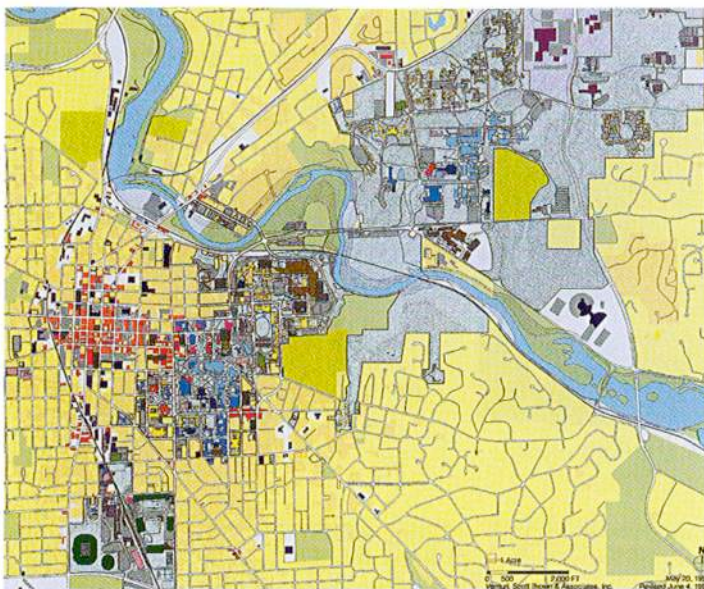
The plan for Jim Thorpe¹³ is exemplary of the way in which the existing city is scrupulously documented in splendid colourful drawings by means of which a specific self-consciousness is expressed, reinforcing the old characteristics of the city. Future scenarios have been proposed for this rundown mining town, covering both the economic perspective and the form of the city.

The analyses of Memphis¹⁴ are also exceptional due to their broad spectrum: the *genius loci* of the Memphis that is described encompasses the trading post on the Mississippi, the melting pot of black, Italian and Jewish culture, as well as gospel, folk, Beale Street blues and the rock and roll of Elvis Presley. Cultural identity is a central theme in this research, which was inconceivable in the universality of early Modernism.

The office of Venturi and Scott Brown, VSBA, has been involved in university planning and construction activities for many years. Its oeuvre now includes an impressive list of faculty and laboratory buildings and, recently, student centres in particular. The student or university centre is a new building type that is as yet little known in the Netherlands. It contains areas such as a restaurant, bookshop, information desk, auditoriums, a library and computer workplaces, and is often intended as the new, binding centre of the campus. In the interpretation of Venturi and Scott Brown, these buildings are the pacemakers for a renewed development of the university: a transformation from a traditional, class-conscious and monodisciplinary institution into a modern university: multicultural, interdisciplinary, oriented towards the consumer. However, because this article covers urban analysis, this is not the place to examine further the extremely interesting university



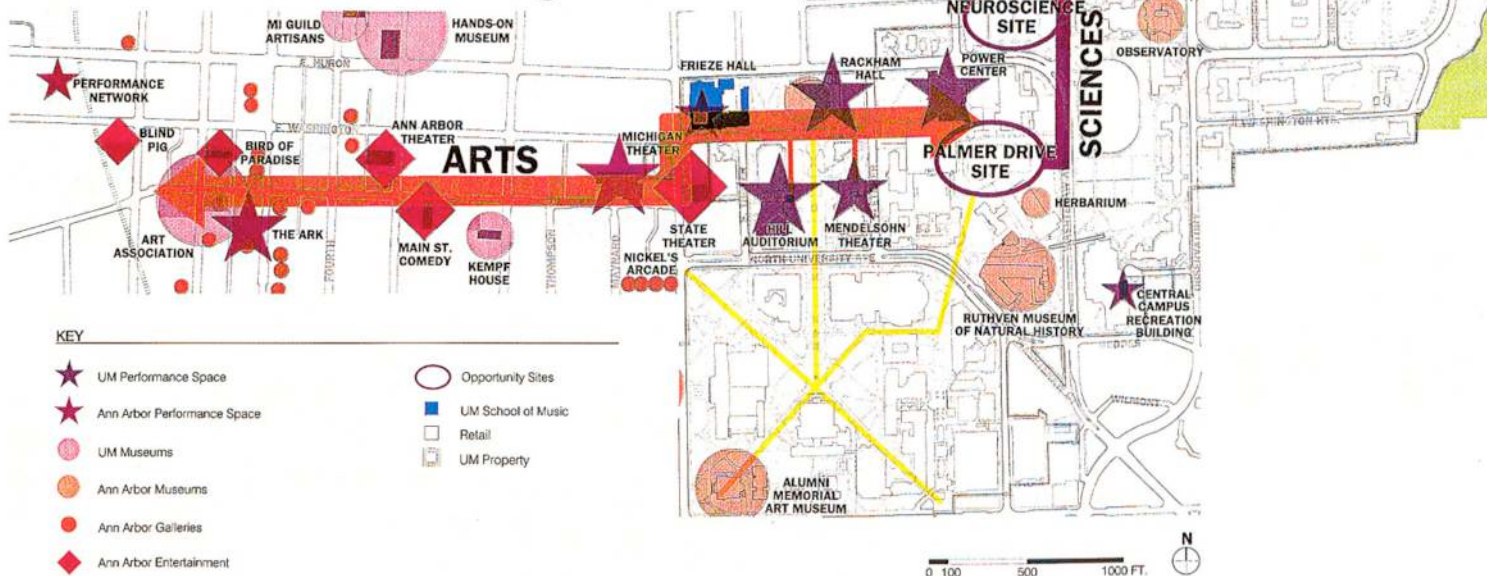
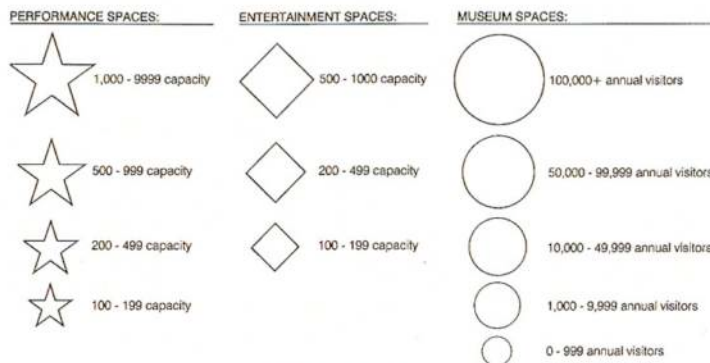
Axonometric projection of Jim Thorpe



Land Use: UM Campus and Surrounding Areas



The Many Landscapes of Michigan:
central and medical campuses



Options for an Arts-Science Axis

centres that VSBA realised in Philadelphia, Princeton, and Delaware.

In the university plans, urban research is still of great current interest and is continually being developed. This is partly due to new computer techniques that offer a wide range of possibilities for cartographic compilations. In addition, the process side of the discipline plays an increasingly important role in this practice and thus in the research method. On the one hand, the university is a laboratory situation in which the various obstacles that tend to make urban planning exceptionally tough going are less relevant. On the other hand, a number of other urban phenomena are important factors here, probably to a greater degree than is normally the case. By this I refer

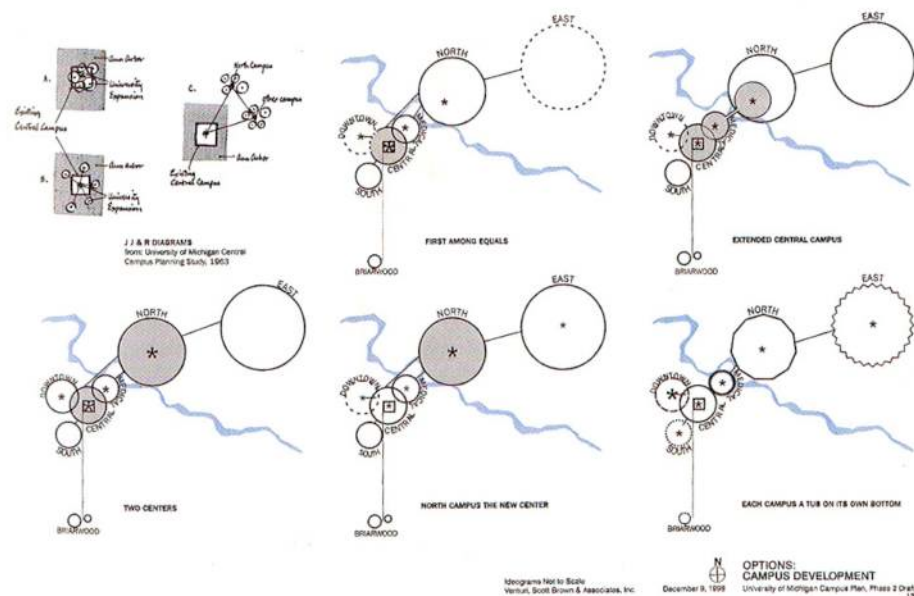
to the above-mentioned transformation into a more open, diverse and consumer or citizen-oriented society, as well as the search for new collective forms of public space, for which the campus seems to be excellently suited as a laboratory.

The enormous quantity of maps and analyses summarised in the *University of Michigan Campus Plan* (two internal presentations of tens of maps and diagrams formulated by the office) is a splendid example of the working method.

The assignment for Michigan was to search for planning concepts for the campus (40,000 students) that would enable healthy use and management both now and within future growth.

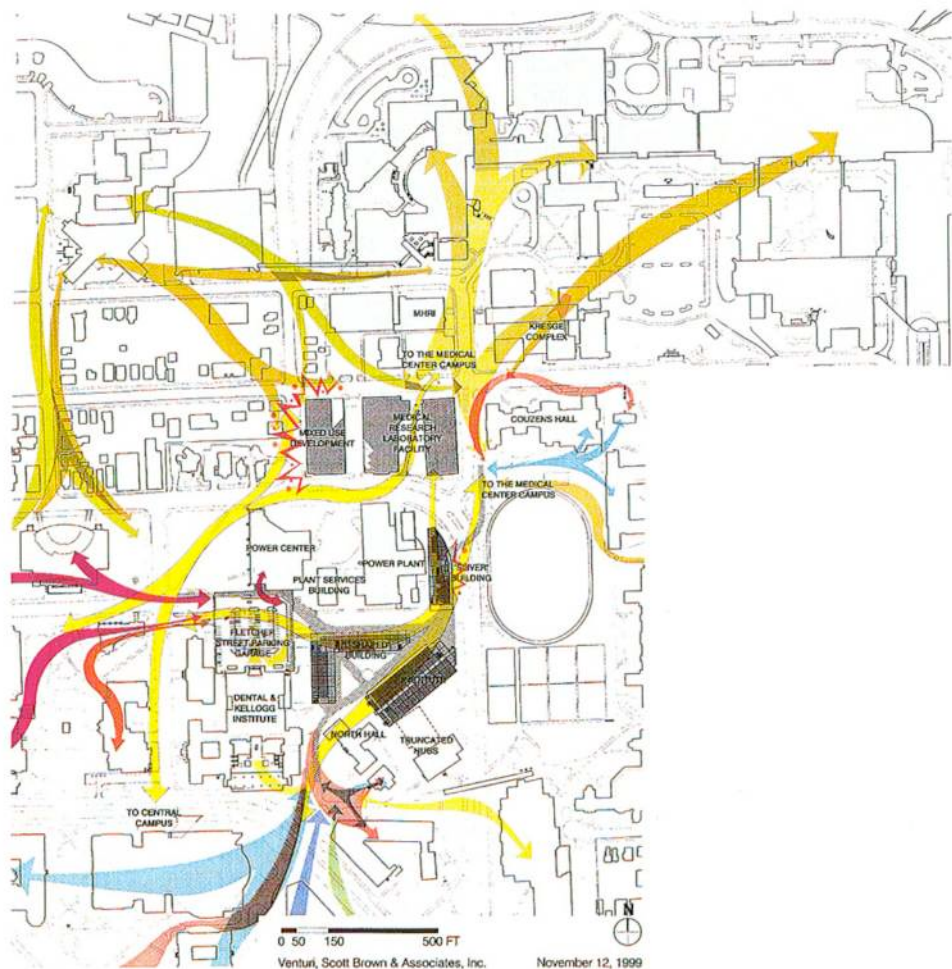
A few maps are presented here to illustrate this.

'The Many landscapes of Michigan' may serve as an example of the great variety of descriptive maps. 'Options: campus development' provides five different models for a campus concept, each of which entails a different development of the campus. 'Options for an Arts-Science Axis' is a map in which not only the notation technique is interesting but also the subject matter, namely, the creation of a connection between the cultural amenities available in the city and the partly existent, partly anticipated new developments in the Life Sciences.



The last map, 'Potential Linkages of the Zina Pitcher Site' displays proposals for a number of new buildings that contain both central university functions and new spaces for the Life Sciences. The two most important buildings in this context are currently being built.

The importance of the process of plan development, decision making and implementation in real-life practice is demonstrated by the *MGOPIO* method that VSBA developed over the years. *MGOPIO* is an abbreviation for *Mission, Goals, Opportunities, Problems, Ideas and Options*. They reveal the processes of thinking in strategies, models and modifications. They represent a modest yet eminent attitude, as was the characterising feature of urban research performed by Venturi and Scott Brown right from the outset.



Potential Linkages for the Zina Pitcher site

Notes

- 1 Venturi, R., Scott Brown, D., Izenour, S., *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT, 1972.

2 Scott Brown, D., *Urban Concepts*, Architectural Design Profile no. 83, London, 1990, 'Rise and Fall of Community Architecture'.

3 'I see an enormous risk in introducing planning. That could easily undermine the vitality of Houston. What I think should be done would be to make a precise analysis of what is happening and, if possible, why. Then a retroactive concept could be extrapolated or could form the basis for a forward-looking extrapolation.' Koolhaas in: Kwinter, S., *Rem Koolhaas: Conversations with Students*, Rice University School of Architecture, Houston, 1996.

4 Project on the City, vol. 2, ed. Chung, Inaba, Koolhaas, Leong, Harvard School of Design, Taschen, 2000.

5 I deal with the discussion in the USA concerning the contrasts between Gehry and Venturi in the article *Amerikaanse Vertellingen* (American Narratives), as yet unpublished.

6 'Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City', see Von Moos, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown *Buildings and Projects*, New York 1987. This exhibition covered the symbolism and aesthetics of everyday American culture. The focal point lay on the suburban lifestyles and the symbolic decoration of middle-class houses.

7 Of those movements, Rossi, a member of the Italian neo-Rationalists, was also searching for a generally comprehensible architectural language, embedded in collective memory. Nevertheless, in Rossi's opinion, the architectural language is an autonomous issue, tied to rules that lie within the field of architecture. Eisenmann, who belongs to what is called the Deconstructivist movement, assumed an extreme position in the debate on autonomy, attempting to uncover the grammar of architecture by deconstructing it.

8 *A Plan for the Republic Square District*, Austin, 1984, and *Washington Avenue revitalisation plan*, Miami Beach, 1979, in: Scott Brown D., *Urban Concepts*.

9 Venturi, R., *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1966.

10 Eliot, T.S., *Selected Essays*, London, 1932.

11 *La Pianta di Roma di Gianbatista Nolli del 1748*, reprint, Rome 1932; see also *Roma Interrotta* AD vol. 49, 1979, Roma Interrotta.

12 Theunissen, K., 'The Difficult Whole in Hybrids', in: Duin, van, L., et al., (ed.) *Hybrids*, De Architectonische Interventie, Delft University Press, 1990.

13 Jim Thorpe: 'Preservation and Economic Revitalisation', in: *Urban Concepts*.

14 'Center City Development Plan for Memphis', in: *Urban Concepts*.

With grateful acknowledgement to Henk Engel.