

reviews

Readers always seemed to like our book review section in the early days of the journal; perhaps some will be pleased to know that we're returning to a modified version of our old policy: there will, once again, be slews of reviews: long ones, essay reviews, short ones, exceedingly short ones. But in retooling for the new models, we find ourselves with the oddly-assorted bunch below—far too many, for our taste, by members of our staff. That's just because of what might be called, to pick up a not-very-original image, subcontracting delays. Wait till we get the line really rolling again!

For a somewhat fuller explanation of what we're up to, see XII, 2, page 4.
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architectural populism

LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS. By Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. Cambridge, Massachusetts. MIT Press. 1972. \$25.

I hope we all know by now that José Ortega y Gasset was wrong. His fear that the rise of a mass audience would pollute what had been essentially elite aristocratic arts by dragging them down to the mass level bears little relationship to the realities of the history of the arts.

Indeed, the characteristic pattern has been quite the opposite: "standard," vernacular or even commercial forms, far from being merely vulgar popularizations of elite forms, have often been the real source of those forms. Typically a genius has come to an already established folk, popular or commercial form and used its clichés, procedures or even its technology to make of it "high art." Cinema and jazz are the best examples in our own day, but are by no means isolated. The modern short story grew out of the subliterate world of the nineteenth-century standard magazine when men like Poe and Hawthorne discovered the real potential of "magazinism." By the same token, Elizabethan theatre clearly operated on the level of popular entertainment; to it came Shakespeare.

The typical critical stance in American architecture involves elite architects lamenting the lack of planning and the inefficiency of controls in the immense world of American building. We have known for some time that the commercial and popular forms which have arisen amount to what can probably be called a vernacular style. I've been struck by this in looking at the very hokey pseudo-styles one has found all through this century in subdivisions. They are not architecture to the elite architec-

ture critic, but everyone's wife knows how to read them. They speak, they say something, the language is understood; its symbols are readily recognizable.

Still, knowing all this, what Mr. Venturi and his associates set out to do in this not-altogether-satisfactory volume does shake one up a bit. We are preconditioned to loathe the architecture of the commercial strip, which they feel is epitomized in the great strip in Las Vegas; they nominate it as an important vernacular style from which, they feel, contemporary architects should learn. And following a visually frustrating and intellectually fuzzy analysis of what that strip represents and how it operates, they turn to projects from their own firm in which they try to apply the lessons they have learned. Deliberate conventionality and the stress on the ordinary produce buildings which are almost deliberately klutzy, and prose which should upset aesthetically-oriented architectural thinkers.

Where this little building [a fire station] looks ordinary, it symbolizes its practical function and standard program. . . .

Part of the sign [identifying a cemetery] is a false facade, because the administrative and sales offices behind the sign are very small. . . .

For the sake of the program and the schedule, our design [for a warehouse to handle big spindles of newsprint] was for a shed, chosen rather than created—a pre-engineered system . . . rectangular in plan, steel-framed, gable-roofed, and sheathed in enameled aluminum with big-scale corrugations and other elegant standardized details. The canopied loading docks . . . and the mezzanine windows . . . were the only exceptions to the “boring” image of the shed.

Learning from Las Vegas suffers problems of format. Though lavishly illustrated, it often attempts to do things which can best be done in film, and the result is sometimes more irritating than enlightening: sequences of tiny frames which fail to give the desired panorama. But the book is significant, even if one thinks of it as only a reaction from the architects to the comically self-conscious discovery made by others in the sixties that there is something worthy in the commercial productions around us. The authors may have selected the wrong productions; they may fail in their self-conscious efforts to learn from the vernacular. Indeed, it's hard to decide whether this is all splendidly democratic or whether they're going slumming, with all the condescension that implies.

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FREEDOM AND THE COURT: Civil Rights and Liberties in the United States. By Henry J. Abraham. New York: Oxford University Press. 1972. \$12.50.

As an introduction to the subject this book is readable and scholarly; it focuses on the problem of balancing individual rights against the interests of the community. Professor Abraham's unexceptionable thesis is that the Judiciary in general and the Supreme Court in particular play a key role in defining and interpreting the fundamental freedoms of the individual in a constitutional regime. This second edition analyzes the last five years of Supreme Court decisions in the area of First Amendment freedoms, due process of law for persons accused of crimes, equality before the law, and tentatively appraises the character of the “Burger Court.” Abraham's study combines historical background, theoretical exploration, and critical legal analysis in an exceptionally able manner.

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ESSAYS ON RADICALISM IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA. Edited by Leon Borden Blair. Austin: University of Texas Press. 1972. \$5.00.

This volume includes four papers presented as the Walter Prescott Webb Memorial Lectures at the University of Texas at Arlington in April, 1971. The brief introduction by Lyndon Johnson is sound and sober, and the editing has reduced much of the unevenness that is inevitable in this kind of book. Because of their quality, and their interdisciplinary approach to important but generally neglected subjects, these essays