

## A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas

Substance for a writer consists not merely of those realities he thinks he discovers; it consists even more of those realities which have been made available to him by the literature and idioms of his own day and by the images that still have vitality in the literature of the past. Stylistically, a writer can express his feeling about this substance either by imitation, if it sits well with him, or by parody, if it doesn't.<sup>1</sup>

Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things.

The commercial strip, the Las Vegas Strip in particular — the example par excellence — challenges the architect to take a positive, non-chip-on-the-shoulder view. Architects are out of the habit of looking nonjudgmentally at the environment, because orthodox Modern architecture is progressive, if not revolutionary, utopian, and puristic; it is dissatisfied with existing conditions. Modern architecture has been anything but permissive: Architects have preferred to change the existing environment rather than enhance what is there.

But to gain insight from the commonplace is nothing new: Fine art often follows folk art. Romantic architects of the eighteenth century discovered an existing and conventional rustic architecture. Early Modern architects appropriated an existing and conventional industrial vocabulary without much adaptation. Le Corbusier loved grain elevators and steamships; the Bauhaus looked like a factory; Mies refined the details of American steel factories for concrete buildings. Modern architects work through analogy, symbol, and image — although they have gone to lengths to disclaim almost all determinants of their forms except structural necessity and the program — and they derive insights, analogies, and stimulation from unexpected images. There is a perversity in the learning process: We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward. And withholding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything.

### Commercial Values and Commercial Methods

Las Vegas is analyzed here only as a phenomenon of architectural communication. Just as an analysis of the structure of a Gothic cathedral need not include a debate on the morality of medieval religion, so Las Vegas's values are not questioned here. The morality of commercial advertising, gambling interests, and the competitive instinct is not at issue here, although, indeed, we believe it should be in the architect's broader, synthetic tasks of which an analysis such as this is but one aspect. The analysis of a drive-in church in this context would match that of a drive-in

## A STUDIO RESEARCH PROBLEM

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The studio programs and work topics were designed by Denise Scott Brown. Portions of them are quoted in this column. Excerpts from writings by students have their names appended.

This has been a technical studio. We are evolving new tools: analytical tools for understanding new space and form, and graphic tools for representing them. Don't bug us for lack of social concern. We are trying to train ourselves to offer socially relevant skills.

1. Richard Poirier, "T. S. Eliot and the Literature of Waste," *The New Republic* (May 20, 1967), p. 21.

restaurant, because this is a study of method, not content. Analysis of one of the architectural variables in isolation from the others is a respectable scientific and humanistic activity, so long as all are resynthesized in design. Analysis of existing American urbanism is a socially desirable activity to the extent that it teaches us architects to be more understanding and less authoritarian in the plans we make for both inner-city renewal and new development.

In addition, there is no reason why the methods of commercial persuasion and the skyline of signs analyzed here should not serve the purpose of civic and cultural enhancement. But this is not entirely up to the architect.

## Billboards Are Almost All Right

Architects who can accept the lessons of primitive vernacular architecture, so easy to take in an exhibit like "Architecture without Architects," and of industrial, vernacular architecture, so easy to adapt to an electronic and space vernacular as elaborate neo-Brutalist or neo-Constructivist megastructures, do not easily acknowledge the validity of the commercial vernacular. For the artist, creating the new may mean choosing the old or the existing. Pop artists have relearned this. Our acknowledgment of existing, commercial architecture at the scale of the highway is within this tradition.

Modern architecture has not so much excluded the commercial vernacular as it has tried to take it over by inventing and enforcing a vernacular of its own, improved and universal. It has rejected the combination of fine art and crude art. The Italian landscape has always harmonized the vulgar and the Vitruvian: the contorni around the duomo, the portiere's laundry across the padrone's portone, Supercortemaggiore against the Romanesque apse. Naked children have never played in our fountains, and I. M. Pei will never be happy on Route 66.

## Architecture as Space

Architects have been bewitched by a single element of the Italian landscape: the piazza. Its traditional, pedestrian-scaled, and intricately enclosed space is easier to take than the spatial sprawl of Route 66 and Los Angeles. Architects have been brought up on Space, and enclosed space is the easiest to handle. During the last 40 years, theorists of Modern architecture (Wright and Le Corbusier sometimes excepted) have focused on space as the essential ingredient that separates architecture from painting, sculpture, and literature. Their definitions glory in the uniqueness of the medium; although sculpture and painting may sometimes be allowed spatial characteristics, sculptural or pictorial architecture is unacceptable — because Space is sacred.

Purist architecture was partly a reaction against nineteenth-century eclecticism. Gothic churches, Renaissance banks, and Jacobean manors were frankly picturesque.<sup>1</sup> The mixing of styles meant the mixing of media. Dressed in

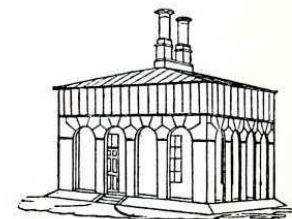
1. "A Dwelling for a Man and his Wife, without children" from Loudon's Encyclopedia . . . "with trellis, with Castellated Gothic jacket, with Monastic Gothic jacket, with Elizabethan jacket . . ."



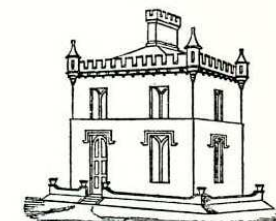
16. "A Dwelling for a Man and his Wife, without Children" from Loudon's Encyclopedia . . .



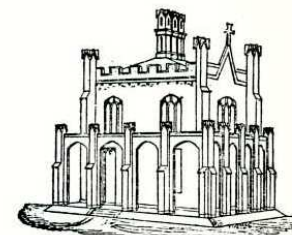
. . . 18, with veranda and terrace . . .



. . . 19, with trellis . . .



. . . 20, with Castellated Gothic jacket . . .



. . . 21, with Monastic Gothic jacket . . .



. . . 22, with Elizabethan jacket.

historical styles, buildings evoked explicit associations and Romantic allusions to the past to convey literary, ecclesiastical, national, or programmatic symbolism. Definitions of architecture as space and form at the service of program and structure were not enough. The overlapping of disciplines may have diluted the architecture, but it enriched the meaning.

Modern architects abandoned a tradition of iconology in which painting, sculpture, and graphics were combined with architecture. The delicate hieroglyphics on a bold pylon, the archetypal inscriptions of a Roman architrave, the mosaic processions in Sant' Apollinare, the ubiquitous tattoos over a Giotto chapel, the enshrined hierarchies around a Gothic portal, even the illusionistic frescoes in a Venetian villa, all contain messages beyond their ornamental contribution to architectural space. The integration of the arts in Modern architecture has always been called a good thing. But one did not paint on Mies. Painted panels were floated independently of the structure by means of shadow joints; sculpture was in or near but seldom on the building. Objects of art were used to reinforce architectural space at the expense of their own content. The Kolbe in the Barcelona Pavilion was a foil to the directed spaces: The message was mainly architectural. The diminutive signs in most Modern buildings contained only the most necessary messages, like LADIES, minor accents begrudgingly applied.

### Architecture as Symbol

Critics and historians, who documented the "decline of popular symbols" in art, supported orthodox Modern architects, who shunned symbolism of form as an expression or reinforcement of content: meaning was to be communicated, not through allusion to previously known forms, but through the inherent, physiognomic characteristics of form. The creation of architectural form was to be a logical process, free from images of past experience, determined solely by program and structure, with an occasional assist, as Alan Colquhoun has suggested,<sup>2</sup> from intuition.

But some recent critics have questioned the possible level of content to be derived from abstract forms. Others have demonstrated that the functionalists, despite their protestations, derived a formal vocabulary of their own, mainly from current art movements and the industrial vernacular; and latter-day followers such as the Archigram group have turned, while similarly protesting, to Pop Art and the space industry. However, most critics have slighted a continuing iconology in popular commercial art, the persuasive heraldry that pervades our environment from the advertising pages of the New Yorker to the superbillboards of Houston. And their theory of the "debasement" of symbolic architecture in nineteenth-century eclecticism has blinded them to the value of the representational architecture along highways. Those who acknowledge this roadside eclecticism denigrate it, because it flaunts the cliché of a decade ago as well

2. Alan Colquhoun, "Typology and Design Method," Arena, Journal of the Architectural Association (June 1967), pp. 11-14.

as the style of a century ago. But why not? Time travels fast today.

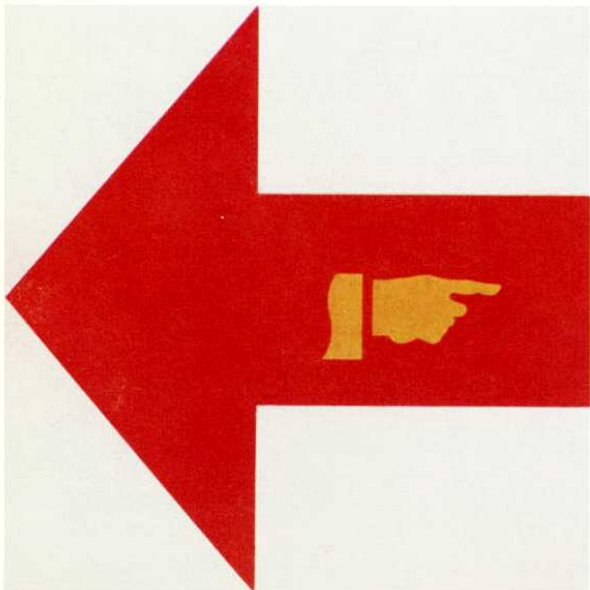
The Miami Beach Modern motel on a bleak stretch of highway in southern Delaware reminds the jaded driver of the welcome luxury of a tropical resort, persuading him, perhaps, to forgo the gracious plantation across the Virginia border called Motel Monticello. The real hotel in Miami alludes to the international stylishness of a Brazilian resort, which, in turn, derives from the International Style of middle Corbu. This evolution from the high source through the middle source to the low source took only 30 years. Today, the middle source, the neo-Eclectic architecture of the 1940s and the 1950s, is less interesting than its commercial adaptations. Roadside copies of Ed Stone are more interesting than the real Ed Stone.

## Symbol in Space Before Form in Space: Las Vegas as a Communication System

The sign for the Motel Monticello, a silhouette of an enormous Chippendale highboy, is visible on the highway before the motel itself. This architecture of styles and signs is antispacial; it is an architecture of communication over space; communication dominates space as an element in the architecture and in the landscape. But it is for a new scale of landscape. The philosophical associations of the old eclecticism evoked subtle and complex meanings to be savored in the docile spaces of a traditional landscape. The commercial persuasion of roadside eclecticism provokes bold impact in the vast and complex setting of a new landscape of big spaces, high speeds, and complex programs. Styles and signs make connections among many elements, far apart and seen fast. The message is basely commercial; the context is basically new.

A driver 30 years ago could maintain a sense of orientation in space. At the simple crossroad a little sign with an arrow confirmed what he already knew. He knew where he was. Today the crossroad is a cloverleaf. To turn left he must turn right, a contradiction poignantly evoked in the print by Allan D'Arcangelo.<sup>2</sup> But the driver has no time to ponder paradoxical subtleties within a dangerous, sinuous maze. He relies on signs to guide him — enormous signs in vast spaces at high speeds.

The dominance of signs over space at a pedestrian scale occurs in big airports. Circulation in a big railroad station required little more than a simple axial system from taxi to train, by ticket window, stores, waiting room, and platform — all virtually without signs. Architects object to signs in buildings: "If the plan is clear, you can see where to go." But complex programs and settings require complex combinations of media beyond the purer architectural triad of structure, form, and light at the service of space. They suggest an architecture of bold communication rather than one of subtle expression.



2. The trip. Allan D'Arcangelo

## LAS VEGAS AS A COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

3-6

WELCOME TO FABULOUS  
LAS VEGAS, FREE  
ASPIRIN — ASK US ANY-  
THING, VACANCY, GAS.

All cities communicate messages — functional, symbolic, and persuasive — to people as they move about. Las Vegas signs hit you at the California border and before you land at the airport. On the Strip three message systems<sup>7</sup> exist: the heraldic (the signs) dominates; the physiognomic, the messages given by the faces of the buildings (the continuous balconies and regularly spaced picture windows of the Dunes say-<sup>9</sup> ing HOTEL and the suburban bungalows converted to chapels by the<sup>10</sup> addition of a steeple); and the locational (service<sup>11, 12</sup> stations are found on corner lots, the casino is in front of the hotel, and the ceremonial valet parking is in front of the casino). All three message systems are closely interrelated on the Strip. Sometimes they are combined, as when the facade of a casino becomes one big sign or the shape of<sup>13, 14</sup> the building reflects its name, and the sign, in turn, reflects the shape. Is the sign the building or the building the sign?<sup>15</sup> These relationships, and combinations between signs and buildings, between architecture and symbolism, between form and meaning, between driver and the roadside are deeply relevant to architecture today and have been discussed at length by several writers. But they have not been studied in detail or as an overall system. The students of urban perception and imageability have ignored them, and there is some evidence that the Strip would confound their theories. How is it that in spite of "noise" from competing signs we do in fact find what we want on the Strip? Also, we have no good graphic tools for depicting the Strip as message giver. How can the visual importance of the Stardust sign be mapped at 1 inch to 100 feet?

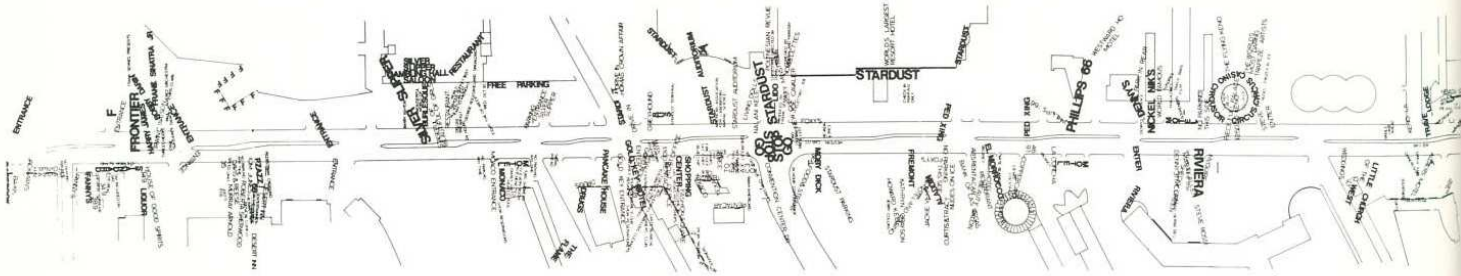


15. La Concha Motel, Las Vegas

16. Night messages

17. Map of Las Vegas Strip (detail) showing every written word seen from the road

18. A comparative analysis of directional spaces



# DIRECTIONAL SPACE

**SPACE · SCALE**  
section 1in.: 50 ft.

**SPEED**

**SYMBOL**  
sign-symbol · bldg. ratio

EASTERN BAZAAR



3 M.P.H.



MEDIEVAL STREET



3 M.P.H.



MAIN STREET



3 M.P.H.  
20 M.P.H.

W



COMMERCIAL STRIP



35 M.P.H.



THE STRIP



35 M.P.H.



SHOPPING CENTER



3 M.P.H.  
50 M.P.H.



W



**SPACE · SCALE · SPEED · SYMBOL**

## The Architecture of Persuasion

The cloverleaf and airport communicate with moving crowds in cars or on foot for efficiency and safety. But words

and symbols may be used in space for commercial persuasion. The Middle Eastern bazaar contains no signs; the

Strip is virtually all signs. In the bazaar, communication works through proximity. Along its narrow aisles, buyers

feel and smell the merchandise, and the merchant applies explicit oral persuasion. In the narrow streets of the

medieval town, although signs occur, persuasion is mainly through the sight and smell of the real cakes through the

doors and windows of the bakery. On Main Street, shop-window displays for pedestrians along the sidewalks and

exterior signs, perpendicular to the street for motorists, dominate the scene almost equally.

On the commercial strip the supermarket windows contain no merchandise. There may be signs announcing the day's

bargains, but they are to be read by pedestrians approaching from the parking lot. The building itself is set back from

the highway and half hidden, as is most of the urban environment, by parked cars. The vast parking lot is in front,

not at the rear, since it is a symbol as well as a convenience. The building is low because air conditioning demands

low spaces, and merchandising techniques discourage second floors; its architecture is neutral because it can hardly be

seen from the road. Both merchandise and architecture are disconnected from the road. The big sign leaps to connect

the driver to the store, and down the road the cake mixes and detergents are advertised by their national manufacturers

on enormous billboards inflected toward the highway. The graphic sign in space has become the architecture of this

landscape. Inside, the A&P has reverted to the bazaar except that graphic packaging has replaced the oral persuasion of

the merchant. At another scale, the shopping center off the highway returns in its pedestrian malls to the medieval



19. Parking lot of a suburban supermarket

20, 21. "The big sign leaps to connect the driver . . ."



22. Tanya billboard on the Strip

In *The View From the Road*, Appleyard, Lynch, and Myer describe the driving experience as "a sequence played to the eyes of a captive, somewhat fearful, but partially inattentive audience, whose vision is filtered and directed forward."<sup>3</sup>

3. Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, and John R. Myer, *The View From the Road* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1963), p. 5.

**Movement perception** along a road is within a structural order of constant elements — the road, sky, lamppost spacing, and yellow stripes. A person can orient himself to this, while the rest just happens! Lynch found that more than half the objects sighted along a road by both drivers and passengers are seen straight ahead and narrowly to the sides, as if with blinders. (That is why the sign must be big and must be along the road.) About one-third of the attention is off to the immediate sides. Attention is also more focused on "moving" objects than on "stable" ones, except when the observer passes a visual barrier and, in order to reorient himself, surveys a new landscape. Speed is the determinant of focal angle, both for driver and passengers. Increases of speed narrow the focal angle with a resulting visual shift from detail to generality; attention shifts to points of decision. The body sensations of speed are few in a car. We depend upon vision for our perception of speed. Objects that pass overhead greatly increase the sense of speed.

Does Las Vegas make any attempt to control speed — slow down, therefore see more detail, therefore buy? (Daniel Scully and Peter Schmitt)



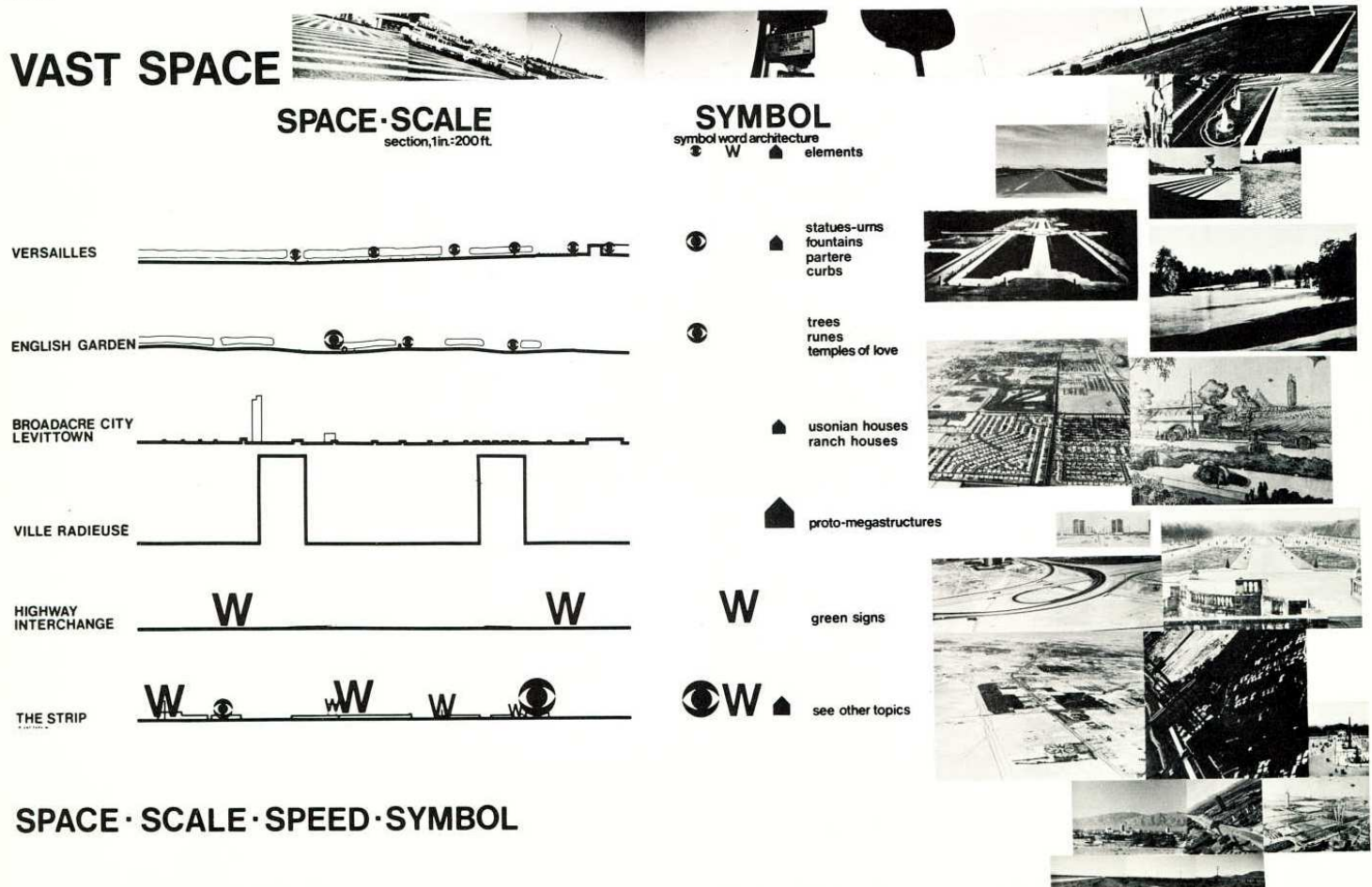
23. Lower Strip, looking north

### Vast Space in the Historical Tradition and at the A&P

The A&P parking lot is a current phase in the evolution of vast space since Versailles. The space that divides high-speed highway and low, sparse buildings produces no enclosure and little direction. To move through a piazza is to move between high enclosing forms. To move through this landscape is to move over vast expansive texture: the megatexture of the commercial landscape. The parking lot is the parterre of the asphalt landscape. The patterns of parking lines give direction much as the paving patterns, curbs, borders, and tapis vert give direction in Versailles; grids of lamp posts substitute for obelisks, rows of urns and statues as points of identity and continuity in the vast space. But it is the highway signs through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, their particular positions in space, their inflected shapes, and their graphic meanings that identify and unify the megatexture. They make verbal and symbolic connections through space, communicating a complexity of meanings through hundreds of associations in few seconds from far away. Symbol dominates space. Architecture is not enough. Because the spatial relationships are made by symbols more than by forms, architecture in this landscape becomes symbol in space rather than form in space. Architecture defines very little: The big sign and the little building is the rule of Route 66.

The Las Vegas Strip eludes our concepts of urban form and space, ancient or modern. It has as little to do with Haussmann as with Ville Radieuse, with Ebenezer Howard as with the Metabolists, with Lynch as with Camillo Sitte or Ian Nairn. Frank Lloyd Wright would have considered it a travesty of Broadacre City, and Maki would probably find it a travesty of "group form." Perhaps Patrick Geddes might have understood, and J. B. Jackson is very much attuned to it.

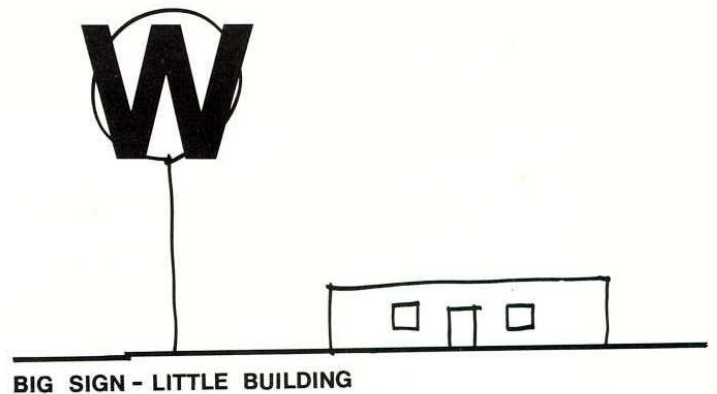
**24.** A comparative analysis of vast spaces



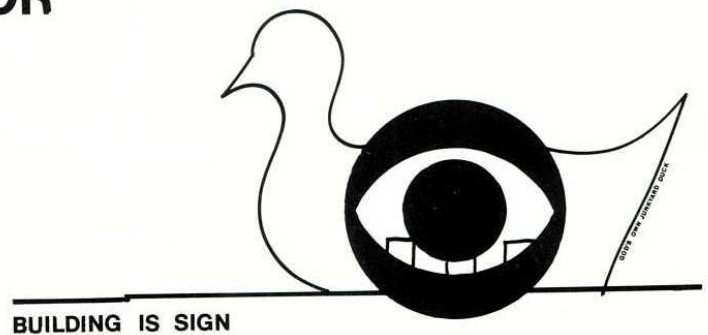
The sign is more important than the architecture. This is reflected in the proprietor's budget: The sign at the front is a vulgar extravaganza, the building at the back, a modest necessity. The architecture is what is cheap. Sometimes the building is the sign: The duck store in the shape of a duck, called "The Long Island Duckling," is sculptural symbol and architectural shelter. Contradiction between outside and inside was common in architecture before the Modern movement, particularly in urban and monumental architecture.<sup>32</sup> Baroque domes were symbols as well as spatial constructions, and they are bigger in scale and higher outside than inside in order to dominate their urban setting and communicate their symbolic message. The false fronts of western stores did the same thing: They were bigger and taller than the interiors they fronted to communicate the store's importance and to enhance the quality and unity of the street. But false fronts are of the order and scale of Main Street. From the desert town on the highway in the West of today, we can learn new and vivid lessons about an impure architecture of communication. The little low buildings, grey-brown like the desert, separate and recede from the street that is now the highway, their false fronts disengaged and turned perpendicular to the highway as big, high signs. If you take the signs away, there is no place. The desert town is intensified communication along the highway.



30. "The Long Island Duckling"  
from God's Own Junkyard



OR



31. Big sign-little building or  
building as sign