Reconsidering the enabling architect

Sergio López-Piñeiro



'Architects' ability to design is directly linked to their ability to manage the deceptions upon which requests are based'

A trade can be of two types depending on the observation skills of its workers: deception managers or truth revealers. The first group is composed of spies, con artists and negotiators: all of them try to show what *is not* while ambiguously hiding what really *is*. Artists mainly define the second group: for them, an artistic product only works when it opens up the reality it aims to describe. Art *is* or *is not*. There is no middle ground: period.

Architecture is the materialisation and rendering of a specific order through the creation of an environment. Therefore, architects' knowledge mainly focuses on how to materialise and render the order that they enable while satisfying its requests through the creation of an environment. Architects' ability to design – materialising and rendering the order they are enabling according to specific requests – is directly linked to their ability to manage the deceptions upon which those requests are based. Owing to the multiple contradictions of our 'post-capitalist' world, the type of architect that predominates is situated between the two groups of trades: an architect now needs to be both an artist and a negotiator/spy/con artist.

Based on these observations, the attitude that would now be required from architects is that of an enabler, that is 'one that enables another to achieve an end; especially: one who enables another to persist in self-destructive behavior (as substance abuse) by providing excuses or by helping that individual avoid the consequences of such behaviour', as *Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary* has it. It is worth emphasising that – in my view and according to the argument I would like to propose in this text – this role replaces others that have previously been of use such as the architect as a producer, as a social servant, as a service provider, and so on. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour best exemplified this enabling attitude in 1972 in the iconic book *Learning from Las Vegas*. Here, I use this book and the position it occupies within the discipline of architecture as an example; although it can be argued that I could use many other case studies that describe and propose this type of attitude, I believe *Learning from Las Vegas* to be the most poignant example because of the Las Vegas casinos' unique ability to link architectural design and social context through the work of an enabling architect.

Now, then, let me start with a blunt statement: in my view, a casino is the most well-planned and thoroughly carried out con ever devised in the history of the not-so-respected art of confidence games. Like confidence games, architecture is based on trust. Although *Learning from Las Vegas* – a book that I admire – did not point out that casinos are a form of confidence game and that architecture is the medium through which the casinos trick the marks (casino goers), I understand the book to be the *ex post facto* manual for materialising the casino's con. The architectural techniques that act as baits can be summarised in a quite poetic statement, 'The Architecture of Persuasion', a phrase that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour used in their book as a section heading.

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From all the games offered by a casino, blackjack is the only one where a player can have the possibility of having better chances of winning than the house. The only way to achieve this is by counting cards, a technique that, if it is performed individually and without any type of help, must be considered absolutely legal – although it is obviously not well regarded by casinos. The first book to mathematically prove that card counting could beat blackjack was Edward Thorp's *Beat the Dealer* from 1962. Although the system explained by Thorp was difficult to use from a practical standpoint, the book was an immediate success. As a consequence, almost all casinos in Las Vegas began to perceive card counting as a threat and most of them implemented some type of change: four decks instead of single deck games, more frequent reshuffling, and so on. Despite these changes, other books followed and continued to exploit Thorp's breakthrough: for instance, *The Casino Gambler's Guide* by Allan N. Wilson (1965), Lawrence Revere's *Playing Blackjack as a Business* (1968), or the so-called 'bible of blackjack', Stanford Wong's *Professional Blackjack* (1975).

Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's interest in Las Vegas was also demonstrated at the same time. *Learning from Las Vegas* was published in 1972, but Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown had previously published the article 'A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas' in *Architectural Forum* in March 1968. The design research studio that served as the basis for the book was conducted at the Yale School of Art and Architecture during the autumn semester of 1968. In other words, while architects were becoming mesmerised with the staging of the con, blackjack players were trying to hack it.

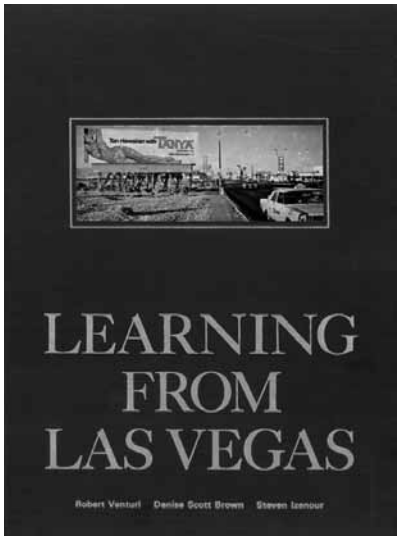
Las Vegas is an impossibility, just as any con is. As a Las Vegas taxi driver described it in Pete Earley's *Super Casino*: 'There wouldn't be any jackpots for someone to win if someone else hadn't lost the money in the first place.' The only successful ways out are by conning back the system (it looks as if I'm just another tourist but I'm counting cards and I'll win your money) or by not playing.

But, how do people feel after being conned? They feel great! In a way, it seems as if people accept this con as part of what comes with enjoying life. For instance the architect Alan Lapidus writes in *Everything by Design* (2007) that: 'Over the course of four days in Las Vegas ... I learned more about the potential of architecture than I had in four years of architectural school ... I watched hordes of humanity literally lined up to lose.' Philip Johnson's statement in Cook and Klotz's *Conversations with Architects* (1973) is harsh, but it unambiguously and quite accurately describes the architect's enabling power as materialised through The Architecture of Persuasion: 'Whoever commissions buildings buys me. I'm for sale. I'm a whore. I'm an artist.'

This statement, however true, leaves me with a hint of sadness since in my view it implies a sense of hopelessness. It is clear that the enabling attitude that now seems to be required from architects is well achieved with The Architecture of Persuasion. However, I am interested in addressing these contradictions with a different model: Blank Architecture.

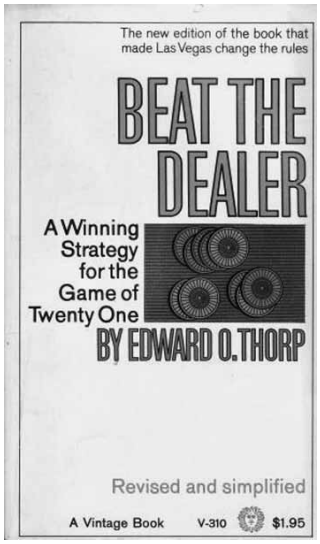
Architectural blankness is the condition that allows and enables (perhaps even encourages) the appropriation of a place by any urban player. With this unparalleled capacity to accommodate any urban agent's desire, blank architecture can be defined as an enabler with the capacity to establish protected spaces for 'consumption'. A very flexible space, one might argue. However, the flexible nature of a blank space, as almost any type of flexibility, is simultaneously functional and ideological. It is precisely due to its apparent lack of inherent ideological content that blank architecture remains constantly available for appropriation and is always on the verge of vanishing into excess and domination.

Despite its similarities with other terms (for instance, the specific names conceived by various architects such as the Smithsons' *The Charged Void*, Iñaki Ábalos and Juan Herreros' *Areas of Impunity*, Rem Koolhaas' 'Typical Plan', or Bernard Cache's borrowed expression 'frames of probability'), I would like to describe blank architecture through four main properties. First, it enables appropriation: blank architecture is an open work. Second, it lacks episodic memory: it is not within



***Learning from Las Vegas*. The iconic text, originally published by the MIT Press in 1972. Architects studied the staging of the con ...**

'like confidence games, architecture is based on trust'



... while blackjack players tried to hack it: Edward Thorp's influential winning strategy was originally published in 1962

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***The Charged Void*: the cover of the book by Alison and Peter Smithson, Monacelli Press, 2001**

'architectural blankness allows and enables the appropriation of a place by any urban player'



Winter view of Frederick Law Olmsted's Delaware Park in Buffalo, New York

the capacities of a blank architectural work to signify, monumentalise, commemorate or remember any specific function or event. Third, any piece that can be considered architecturally blank is initially designed empty. However, blank architecture should not be confused with minimal architecture. Minimal architecture wants, and needs, to remain empty. Blank architecture, on the other hand, accepts its disappearance when it is taken over or appropriated by any form of saturation. Lastly, blank architecture aims to produce a psychological effect on its dwellers. Blankness is an architectural condition with the capacity to link an initially liberating political project (enables appropriation) with a specific mode of operation (lacks episodic memory) through a precise formal composition (initially empty). This alignment, however, would not be complete if it were not associated, in one way or another, with the psychological state of the blank space's population.

In other words, architectural blankness is an architectural quality that produces a similar result as when the ground is covered with snow. For instance, when the snow covers a university campus, people realise that they can use it as they see fit: notices like 'Keep off the grass' or 'Stay on the path' suddenly become useless and irrelevant. The snow, as a blank blanket, erases the episodic memory of a place (the events that took place no longer matter), opens up the possibilities for its appropriation, produces a psychological effect on people, and empties the space by eliminating differences.

This operation is similar to John Cage's piece *4'33"*. As is well known, this piece was first performed in 1952 by the pianist David Tudor. For his performance, David Tudor showed up on stage, sat down at the piano, turned on his stopwatch, and remained there without hitting any key until 4 minutes and 33 seconds had passed by. During this carefully planned period of silence – the piece is a three-movement composition – the auditorium became filled up with the different sounds that the audience invariably makes (sneezing, coughing, shifting in their seats, and so on). *4'33"* can be described from two complementary perspectives: as the creation of a silent time to be appropriated freely by the public or as the revelation of sounds that already existed but that nobody had truly heard before.

Blank Architecture, as an architect's operating model attempting to address the contradictions imposed by the enabling demands of our society, should focus on opening up spaces typically cast aside as 'no man's lands'. In other words, and to use another example, the apparent lack of inherent ideological content that blank architecture should exhibit is necessary for the creation of a place in limbo, that which is neither Heaven nor Hell. Places, in summary, which will turn out to be whatever their inhabitants want them to be. In my mind, this is as far, or as close, as architecture should go.

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