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On Ducks and Decoration
Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi

Loos equated decoration with sin; Perret believed it always hid a fault in construction. International stylists believed it was valid as the *joie d'esprit* of the individual craftsman as he worked by hand on the great cathedrals sculpting to the glory of God, but that in a machine age the I-thou relation with materials and construction is lost and so is the point of decoration; the same *joie d'esprit* should now, it was felt, be expressed through the beautiful and precise use of machine-made building elements and the eloquent spaces of the building itself. The whole building is the decoration.

This may have been literally and ironically more true than was intended. Contemporary painting and sculpture is now generally accepted as a formal source of early modern architecture—whole buildings from this period, in fact, resembled constructivist sculptures or cubist paintings. But this happened on an unconscious level. Architects such as Le Corbusier lived their connection to the arts intensely and it came through in their work.

A vocabulary of forms whether consciously possessed or not is probably as important in the synthesizing process which gets from functional requirements to a building as is a load of bricks. Whether you call it "composition" or "plastic organization" you have to have a philosophy about it. Your philosophy may be more or less useful depending on how well it helps you relate forms to requirements.

Later architects have taken too literally the functionalist dictum and allowed the formal vocabulary (still unadmitted) to stultify. We don't admit the importance of having a philosophy about forms, because a good building should arise like Venus purely from the functional requirements. But since this is impossible, a repertoire of old hand-me-downs, from Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, or Lou Kahn slips in unnoticed while the pieties of each on antiformalism are mouthed.

Because applied decoration is still taboo the whole building is still the decoration. Only now, artists like Le Corbusier, sensitive to what they are denying, are not involved, so the formal vocabularies are dull, unsuited, and unrevised for today's needs. The more interesting the attempts of our best, most avant-garde architects at mannered complexity supposedly derived from structure and program, the more uninteresting their buildings become: they may heave themselves up on needless *pilotis*, corset themselves in rusted iron stays, zap out and up in plan and section ten stories, making twenty apartments with "bad space," or welcome in a heedless multitude to an unused piazza. They do these deeply distorting things for the sake of appearance, but they have no "decoration."

We believe a new interest in the architecture of communication involving symbolism and mixed media will lead us to reevaluate the eclectic and picturesque styles of the last century, to reappraise our own commercial architecture—pop architecture, if you wish—and finally to face the question of decoration. We have distinguished in a previous article¹ between two types of heraldry in the commercial environment: the sign which *is* the building (for example, the roadside duck, first brought to fame in Peter Blake's book) and the sign which *fronts* the building. The first distorts the less important inside function of drawing you in. The second, applied to the building or separated from it with the parking lot between, allows the modest eating function to take place without distortion in a modest building, right for it, and permits the symbolic function its own leeway as well—they need not coincide and it is probably cheaper and

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easier if they don't.

Our thesis is that most architects' buildings today are ducks; buildings where an expressive aim has distorted the whole beyond the limits of economy and convenience; and that this, although an unadmitted one, is a kind of decoration, and a wrong and costly one at that. We'd rather see the need admitted and the decoration applied where needed, not in the way the Victorians did it but to suit our time, as easily as the billboard is pasted on its superstructure: with the building it is applied to allow it to go its own conventional way, no more distorted than are the functional wind bracing and catwalks of the superstructure. This is an easier, cheaper, more direct, and basically more honest approach to the question of decoration; it permits us to get on with the task of making conventional buildings conventionally and to deal with their symbolic needs with a lighter, defter touch. It may lead us to reevaluate Ruskin's horrifying statement, "architecture is the decoration of structure." But add to it Pugin's warning: it is all right to decorate construction, but never construct decoration.²

Notes

- 1 "Learning from Las Vegas, or a Significance for A & P Parking Lots," *Architectural Forum*, March 1968.
- 2 We are grateful to Mr. Alan Lacous, A.I.A., for this indirect quotation.

