

Branch Identity: Duck or Decorated Shed



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We had just finished presenting new designs for a fast-casual restaurant building when someone asked, “Do we want to be a *duck* or a *decorated shed*?” I was in a meeting with a team from a national restaurant brand that had recently completed a new store concept. We were developing a variation of the concept to create a more cost-effective retrofit design and a more international aesthetic influenced by their varied global store designs. It was a simple question, but I was completely taken aback by it and honestly can’t recall how the conversation went after that. The *duck* and *decorated shed* reference is an obscure one. Although the theory is somewhat familiar within architectural academic circles, it’s entirely rare to hear it mentioned in a corporate setting of one of the largest brands in the world. The theory is *the duck vs. the decorated shed*.

In 1972, the architects and theorists Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour (VBI) published a book as part of an architectural studio at the Yale School of Art and Architecture. The book detailed their study and theory on the architecture of Las Vegas. In it they introduced the concept of *the duck vs. the decorated shed* to make a distinction between the direct metaphoric approach of representing an idea in architecture and the application of signs (lettering) to communicate the idea. The *duck* defines a building as a symbol referring only to itself, while the *decorated shed* defines the building as box architecture with symbols or signs applied to it. The authors used simple sketches to present the two scenarios, which have since become iconic.

They published the book *Learning From Las Vegas* in 1972. To them, Las Vegas strip architecture of the 1960s or more accurately, strip signage—was the contemporary vernacular of architectural symbolism. They equated the direct (denotative) symbols of the strip signage to the direct symbols implicit in the Medieval, Gothic, Baroque, and Renaissance architectural facades and forms.

VBI stated that most buildings are neither pure *ducks* nor *decorated sheds*, but rather a hybrid of both. But the question is still powerful relative to the expression of content and contemporary brand identity. The book catalogued a new emergent condition in American architecture, driven by cars and Madison Avenue ad agencies consisting of street signage, branding, and communication. They referred to it as “automobile-oriented commercial architecture”—a result of the construction of expansive road networks and the love of the automobile, combined with a new visual landscape of competing brands.

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Las Vegas was a supermarket at the scale of a city, with shoppers in cars speeding down the strip. Every casino, hotel, and retailer competed for attention, investing in expressive and dynamic road signs loaded with symbolism, vernacular references, and messaging. Because these buildings on the strip were set way back from the road, preceded by massive parking lots, their roadside signs needed to arrest attention and seduce people in. VBI identified these signs as the new architecture. It was on the signs where the symbols lay, a comparison they made with Renaissance church architecture, where symbols appeared on the facades of buildings. Just as those church facades conveyed the meaning behind the architecture, VBI reasoned, so too did the roadside signs of the Las Vegas strip.

VBI presented the *duck vs. the decorated shed* as an argument against Modernist architecture, its rejection of explicit symbolism and engagement of abstract qualities, such as space, form, color, texture, and scale. They rejected the Modernist “architecture for the sake of architecture,” a reference to Modern art’s dematerialization of symbolism and figure. Just as art became about paint, canvas, color, and texture devoid of figuration, so, too, did Modern architecture become about, in the words of VBI, “abstract qualities.” The larger conversation underlining their study defended their architectural style. Critics had referred to Venturi and Scott-Brown’s projects as too “ugly and ordinary,” and *Learning From Las Vegas* upheld their architecture as rooted in the contemporary condition. This perspective is what makes this text, and the *duck vs. decorated shed* concept, so potent, still today. Through typological comparison, it created a framework for the consideration of a building’s identity and the conversation around the value of signs and symbols, and their use in architecture. The first big question of any new building design must start with where on the *duck vs. decorated shed* spectrum it falls.



(1.) Reprinted from *Learning From Las Vegas*

Let’s dive into definitions of each (see, also, the comparison table of criteria from *Learning From Last Vegas* on the last page).

First, the *duck*. The *duck* is, “where the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form. This kind of building-becoming-sculpture we call the duck in honor of the duck-shaped drive-in, “The Long Island Duckling,” illustrated in *God’s Own Junkyard*

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by Peter Blake (Fig. 1).” The Long Island Duckling, also referred to as The Big Duck was a stucco building in the shape of a duck. It was originally built by a duck farmer and used as a shop to sell ducks and duck eggs. The *duck* is a direct symbol, it does not stand for anything other than itself. As a side note, the use of *duck* as a stand-in for Modernist architecture tends to create confusion. The authors clearly wanted Modernist architecture to look silly because The Big Duck building was not sculptural, nor abstract, nor referent to architecture itself. It was directly a duck representing a duck.

VBI explained the *duck* as follows:

The stylistic eclecticism of the nineteenth century was essentially a symbolism of function [read form follows function], although sometimes a symbolism of nationalism. [There is a longer description here that has too many references, but the building type examples are interesting] Banks were Classical basilicas to suggest civic responsibility and tradition; commercial buildings looked like burghers' houses; universities copied Gothic rather than Classical colleges... to make symbols of "embattled learning.." The hamburger-shaped hamburger stand is a current, more literal, attempt to express function via association but for commercial persuasion rather than theological refinement. ...functionalism via association [is] a symbolic manifestation of functionalism that preceded the substantive functionalism that was a basis for the Modern movement: Image preceded substance. ...Modern architects began to make the back the front. ...Modern ornament has seldom been symbolic of anything non-architectural... its content is consistently spatial and technological.

Ironically, the Modern architecture of today, while rejecting explicit symbolism and frivolous applique ornament, has distorted the whole building into one big ornament. In substituting "articulation" for decoration, it has become a duck.

On the other hand, the *decorated shed* was “where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them.” Whereas the *duck* is a symbol, the *decorated shed* applies symbols. There are a lot more *decorated sheds* than *ducks*, and this was part of VBI’s argument. Many buildings today are simple box forms with a big sign on the front, maybe a unique or branded entry portal, and a large branded sign adjacent to the road. They tend to be generic, ordinary, and ugly.

VBI explained the *decorated shed* as follows:

The purest decorated shed would be some form of conventional systems-building shelter that corresponds closely to the space, structure, and program requirements of the architecture, and upon which is laid a contrasting—and, if in the nature of the circumstances, contradictory—decoration.

VBI held up the Las Vegas strip example as a new contemporary condition. They said, “it is an architecture of communication over space; communication dominates space as an element in the architecture and in the landscape.” They argued that architecture had always communicated meaning, it had always been latent with signs and symbols, and the contemporary architecture and visual landscape of the day was a com-

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bination of sign and building. It was a new form of architecture. The Renaissance facade had been removed from the building form and set freestanding adjacent to the roadside.

Our cities and shopping districts, which tend to be local strip malls, are versions of the Las Vegas strip. Anchor buildings, such as large box retailers, are often set far back from the road with large street signs directly adjacent to the road and smaller, filler retail consisting of fast-food restaurants, banks, and mobile phone stores. I'm not interested in supporting nor arguing against VBI's stance. I am, however, interested in the conversation that began in that corporate meeting room I was in about creating *ducks* or *decorated sheds*. I do not believe that the person who posed the question in that meeting was interested in VBI's argument of ugly and ordinary architecture versus heroic and original. They were asking if their building identity should represent its content or if it should be communicating in more subtle and nuanced ways. Should it be a *duck* or a *decorated shed*? Since that meeting, I have often introduced the VBI theory as a catalyst, inviting clients to think about the design of their stores and buildings and how they communicate to the public.

For me, the *duck* stands in for a false narrative or an overly branded condition, not Modernist architecture, while the *decorated shed* is letting the sign do the communicative work. While I may not be staying true to VBI's concept, I would argue that they didn't either. They got too caught up in their own defense and distaste for Modernism and tended to stray from the more interesting conversation about "automobile-oriented commercial architecture." How do we communicate brands through architecture, and what level of direct symbolism is necessary, if any?

A brand is both functional—for awareness and identification—but also affective and emotional—creating the desire to approach and engage with the brand or its property. The brand may also be narrative, or storytelling. The REI store, for example, adopts the architecture of commercial ski structures with an ice axe for a door handle, referencing the product that founded the REI business. Does the REI store tend toward *duck* or *decorated shed*? And beyond typology, is it successful functionally, aesthetically, and affectively, i.e. is it communicating and creating a great experience for the brand? REI is interesting because it tends to select real estate, or if possible, craft their sites to contextualize its stores within their landscape, making their environments feel less retail and more experiential. They create their own *decorated shed* vernacular to be less *duck*.

The *duck* or *decorated shed* question can help moderate design decisions. Is the building more a direct symbol or its own sculpture? Or, is it more generic, relative to its context, relying on applied signage for communication and affective outcomes? Does a bank need to express security, or is it better to communicate transparency? How do people interpret either of these architectural conditions, and are we too reliant on the *duck*, a building that dumbly looks like it does inside?

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Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour laid bare a new architectural condition of the American roadside building and sign. Architecture is now a matter of advertising. In their text, the authors admit their discussion is focused on image, but I want to make clear that I am not proposing to reduce architecture to a superficial application of signs and symbols. Architecture is physical, affective, and experiential. But it is first an image. This is more so true today as we see the world through the lens of our phones and Instagram. So, to update VBI's description, we live in an Instagrammable "automobile-oriented commercial architecture" and before we can begin to build any experience, we need to consider: Is it a *duck* or a *decorated shed*?

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recopied from *Learning From Las Vegas*

Decorated Shed	Duck
An architecture of meaning	An architecture of expression
Explicit "denotative" symbolism	Implicit "connotative" symbolism
Symbolic ornament	Expressive ornament
Applied ornament	Integral expressionism
Mixed media	Pure architecture
Decoration by attaching of superficial elements	Unadmitted decoration by the articulation of integral elements
Symbolism	Abstraction
Representational art	"Abstract expressionism"
Evocative architecture	Innovative architecture
Societal messages	Architectural content
Propaganda	Architectural articulation
High <i>and</i> low art	High art
Evolutionary, using historical precedent	Revolutionary, progressive, anti-traditional
Conventional	Creative, unique, and original
Old words with new meanings	New words
Ordinary	Extraordinary
Expedient	Heroic
Pretty in front	Pretty (or at least unified) all around
Inconsistent	Consistent
Conventional technology	Advanced technology
Tendency toward urban sprawl	Tendency toward mega-structure
Starts from client's value system	Tries to elevate client's value system and/or budget by reference to Art and Metaphysics
Looks cheap	Looks expensive
"Boring"	"Interesting"

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