Of ducks and decorated sheds

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In the late sixties, design students in a Yale University workshop called “Learning from Las Vegas” subtitled their research “The Great Proletarian Cultural Locomotive.” In the eponymous 1972 book, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour wrote that highbrow modernist architecture had devolved into an authoritarian style-and-ideology cult that disregarded what “ordinary” people actually liked: it wasn’t what we’d call user-friendly. But strip-mall and pop-influenced buildings allegedly expressed populist taste, and, from a car-centric perspective, were easy-to-use.

Since then, we’ve reconciled the user. We’ve concluded that in cities, s/he is probably walking: expecting to drive directly to a building doesn’t fit sustainable ideals of urban vibrancy. But our stepped-up interest in new urbanist, pedestrian-friendly cities doesn’t address Learning from Las Vegas’s essential challenge: what architectural qualities satisfy us? What do we need?

Venturi and co-authors argued the following distinction between idealist (highbrow) and populist architecture: highbrow buildings are symbols in themselves, while populist buildings are simply sheds appliquéd with basically easy-to-read symbols.

They called the former “ducks,” after a Long Island building that was entirely shaped like a duck. Ducks have traditionally feathered architecture’s nest, but their modernist offspring were unloved by the people. Sheds—buildings decorated with symbols—offered less contentious (and cheaper) alternatives. Hence Victoria’s populist “quaintness brand” equated elsewhere?), learned defenders rally around the “starchitect,” and the man-on-the-street lambastes the duck’s alleged incomprehensibility (see reactions to Norman Foster’s London “Gherkin,” for example). But for the most part, we’ve grown comfortable with decorated sheds, arguing merely over the degree and quality of decoration: is the shed “traditional” or “modernist”? Are the appliqués real stone or fiberglass? Does the roofline wink knowingly at modernism (flat or postmodernism (whimsically peaked and tweaked)? Is the architect-decorator a minimalist-minded aesthete or a tongue-in-cheek po-mo rake? And naturally we worry about the user in a whole new (beneficial) way, for we try to ensure that s/he is offered a fine-grained streetscape.

If it’s true that we’re living amidst sheds, striving to embrace our inner decorator (whether arch-modern or quasi-traditional), do Learning’s distinctions still have any relevance today? And what can Victoria, blessed with ducks, learn from Learning?

We have leftover ducks, from the days before it became de rigueur to pound everyone down to the same level of mediocrity. Some of them, like the Crystal Garden, are quite petite. Others, like the Legislative, the Empress, or our churches, are massive—tall, even! These buildings are for the most part pure symbol. They stand out and are in no sense decorated sheds. But somewhere in the twentieth century, downtown Victoria embraced the seemingly trouble-free egalitarianism of shed-thood with a vengeance. These buildings fall in line; don’t stand out; conform to arbitrary height restrictions; keep a low profile. Only recently have we again embarked on erecting more interesting structures.

It strikes me that Learning’s lessons could illuminate Victoria’s deep-seated aversion to ducks, which today is compounded by (or confused with) fear of the tall shed. We pay lip service to wanting “quality architecture,” yet we can’t seem to face the fact that quality involves embracing the occasional duck, and that scurrying to the safety of small sheds is no solution.

We say we don’t want “Vancouver buildings” (whatever that means), but we don’t talk much about how symbols—literal and metaphoric—imbue what are for the most part simply tall sheds. We have no vocabulary, it seems, to address our need for symbolic architecture, and so we run into absurd situations where, for example, tall sheds are appliquéd with “traditional” hunting lodge motifs (“Soaring Peaks,” Bear Mountain), or we build sheds of uninspiring crudeness, manfully erasing from concrete faces what should be the very poetry of modernist idealism (“The Wave,” downtown).

Applied murals don’t equate to symbolism or poetry, just as ubiquitous pastel-coloured stucco doesn’t make tall sheds beautiful. Yet tall buildings need poetic symbolism most of all, which is why architects should explore...
A "Vancouver building"

how they accord with a deep-seated desire for meaning. I'd argue that biophilic design principles offer a roadmap for effective (and affective) symbolism, but space constraints dictate that I leave this for another article.

Suffice to say that having passed through post-modernism’s blender-bender, we’re actually in the fortunate position of not having to choose between duck or shed: a poetic shed can very nearly be a real duck. But we need architects whose tools extend beyond computer-aided design, whose understanding goes past “Modernism/Traditionalism 101.” We also need creative planners whose rules don’t straightjacket developers into building insipid boxes.

Till then, I await the sound of one (new) building quacking.

Yule Heibel returned to Victoria in 2002, after living in the US where she earned her doctorate in art in architectural history at Harvard and taught at MIT, Brown, and Harvard. She is the published author of a book and numerous articles.