Dörte Kuhlmann: Asked to give students of architecture the best advice they could think of, the four architects of alles wird gut, a successful young Viennese office, had this to say: “Go to Vegas.” Since the eighteenth century, people have said that you are not an architect if you haven’t been to Rome, but now Las Vegas is apparently where you have to go.

Denise Scott Brown: That’s probably our fault.

Robert Venturi: We were using Las Vegas as an extreme example of the automobile city, which planners and architects despised and considered irrelevant.

DK: Back in 1972, in Learning from Las Vegas, you said: “Perhaps the most tyrannical element today in our architecture is space!” Do you still feel the same way in 2005?

RV: Over the years I became irritated by the over-emphasis on space as the essential element of architecture. I think it has been used by architects and theorists to promote abstraction as the ideal aesthetic of the Modernist 20th century. It is ironic that, on the one hand, the early Modernists loved abstraction yet, on the other, they promoted symbolism, via the industrial architectural vocabulary they employed. But the main point is that they emphasized space as a way of keeping architecture abstract and of keeping out the traditional element of symbolism and iconography, which horrified them because they were connected with the idea of style. So space became the enemy of iconography and symbolism.

DSB: Today, the Neomodernists are again very interested in space (and in structure, though not in function). But their spaces are what I call “swoop”. They swoop this way and that, often for reasons that are hard to decipher. Neomodernists are also very against an idea that interests us considerably: the notion of the processional—the street through the building, the way through the building—thought of as a positive and usable element in itself. You could interpret much of Peter Eisenman’s work, for example, as deliberately obfuscating the processional, starting with the front door, which he obliterates by including a great many entrances into the building.

DK: While your Complexity and Contradiction and Learning from Las Vegas sponsored much of the theoretical discussion on meaning, symbolism or iconography in architecture in the seventies and eighties, in the last decade, the younger generation started talking about a-signifying signs and refusing everything that has to do with representational meaning of any kind as a part of their rejection of postmodernism as well as deconstruction.
DSB: If they think they can escape symbolism, they are falling into the same trap that the Modernists did, the trap we described in *Learning from Las Vegas*. When they say “Remove the reference!” they’re like the politicians who say, “Let’s take it out of politics!” What they really mean is, “Let’s take it into another politics, the politics I control.” The Neomodernists take architecture away from the general symbolism, only to situate it within their own symbolism—the symbolism of “no symbolism”. They need to look at what happened to the early Modernists. In the end they themselves tired of plain white walls; they produced the flowery Late Modernist style that we criticized in the 1960s. If today’s Neomodernists think they are free of symbolism, they will be more tyrannized by it than if they had consciously realized that they are using it.

RV: In *Learning from Las Vegas* and in the first part of our new book *Architecture as Signs and Systems for a Mannerist Time* we argue that architecture should no longer deal in abstract expressionism. It should reassess what has been vivid and valid within the many traditions of the past: Egyptian temples with hieroglyphics, Gothic stained glass windows, Byzantine mosaics, frescos in Italian palazzi, and on and on. As well as searching for symbolism in Las Vegas, we should go back to the tradition of iconography that has been essential to all architecture of the past.

DSB: In my chapters of the book, I discuss how architecture may be evolved from an understanding of different kinds of urban and social systems—some, for example, economic systems, are not physical. The work of the most recent Pritzker recipient, Thom Mayne, concerns “urban mapping”, which seems to be in vogue now. Thom uses it as a base for Neomodern shape-making. I’ve worked with urban mapping since 1960. I use it to learn about patterns of relationships within and around our projects and as a conceptual model to help us achieve reality-based design. We have evolved ways of designing using mapping techniques and mapped information that derive from the social sciences, particularly economics. I think our methods give us an opportunity to take account of aspects of architecture that are difficult to consider in design.

DK: I can see how architectural signs can be manipulated in a mannerist way, but can such systems also be mannerist?

DSB: Mannerism applies to both signs and systems. At the end of Bob’s section there is a chapter on mannerism and at the end of mine there is another. In 1960, when we met, we were both independently interested in mannerism. Since then, we’ve built on this interest together, and in so doing we have come to define it a little differently from how it’s normally defined. The German historians who “discovered” Mannerism (with a big M), the historical movement in art and architecture, related it to decadence and neurosis. In the 1950s, the New Brutalists, coached by English and European architectural historians, became extremely interested in Mannerism. They had been reassessing early Modernism and, in the process, rediscovered the *Neue Sachlichkeit* of the 1920s, which they named “the new objectivity”. From it, they derived a precept: “Look very straight at a problem and face its real issues, whether you like them or not, for these will give you a direct solution to your problem. Don’t worry if the design you find isn’t beautiful; it may be beautiful one day.” Le Corbusier too: his “eyes that will not see”, meant, “We have discovered real, strong solutions to modern problems. If they look ugly to you, it’s because your eyes are unaccustomed to them.”
But, having followed the *Neue Sachlichkeit* toward ugly architecture, the Brutalists found it easy to go, from the shock value of breaking the rules for good reason, to enjoying architecture that broke the rules for no real reason—to Mannerism. I think this was probably why the Brutalists started liking the Mannerists.

RV: In 1966, in *Complexity and Contradiction*, I explicitly described Mannerism as being very significant. The concepts of complexity and contradiction were very much a parallel to Mannerism. In this regard, my favorites in Italy are Palladio and Michelangelo, even Borromini. Michelangelo is not really known as a Mannerist architect, but take a look at the rear facade of St. Peter’s. You’ll see a giant-order column with a small window set right beside its capital. The window is the same size as the capital. I love that contradiction of scales. And if you consider mannerism with a small “m”, not the Renaissance style, you can find it in many places. For example, you could think of Luigi Moretti or Armando Brasini as mannerists. And that’s also why I so very much love English historical architecture, especially Elizabethan and Jacobean. But I think there is a flow of mannerism, with a small “m”, through the whole of English architectural history. John Soane, for example, is full of mannerism.

DSB: The original Mannerists were Renaissance architects who knew the rules superbly well—so well that they could break them, cunningly, cleverly, and amusingly. But they didn’t break them all over or all the time. That would produce dullness! We feel that there must be good reason—not just fun—to break the rules today. We have built this idea into our discussions and definitions of mannerism for now.

DK: Many young architects today look at architecture neither as an issue of communication nor as one of style or even formal coherence; instead, they go to Vegas to “archainmentment”, theming and scripted spaces, branding, profit-making and other basically economic issues. Can they also learn from mannerism?

DSB: In today’s cities, many systems come together, and you can’t simply follow all the rules of all them, because they are frequently in conflict. You have to have a philosophy and strategy of bending the rules to make all work together. That is a modern reason for mannerism.

Rem Koolhaas, for one, likes this Promethean environment. He likes to swing where the great systems clash, up there with the gods on Mount Olympus. The notion of an architect’s trying to survive the clashes of larger-than-life urban systems was very pertinent while I was writing the chapter on mannerism, because the World Trade Center crisis was upon us. I wished the Libeskinds good luck!

RV: There’s also an interest now in multiculturalism. And mannerism accommodates multiculturalism and the complexities and contradiction that it involves. Pop culture and indigenous culture are both acknowledged now and both should come together. In vital cities, such as Shanghai and Tokyo, the cultural mix comes together very beautifully.

DSB: Returning to the issue of architecture and economics: my half of *Architecture as Signs and Systems* covers many kinds of systems, including economic ones. It talks about the patterns that systems make on the land. Look at the patterns of
Paul Klee’s line drawings and watercolors; then look at the diagrams and maps of the regional economists, Johann Heinrich von Thünen, Walter Christaller or August Lösch. They all have a similar evocative beauty. They should serve as muse to urban designers.

In our projects we apply economic disciplines, not only at an urban level but also at the level of the building. We say that we do land-use and transportation planning *inside* buildings. And we do so in relation to the processional through the building. In a town, where two main streets meet, there is a market place. So where is the market place inside the building?

In our Hôtel du Département in Toulouse, at the meeting points between major corridors, there are “*coins cafés*”. In our laboratory buildings we place a lounge on every floor, where the vertical and horizontal circulation meet. People from different labs or different disciplines may meet and start to exchange ideas. Then where will the next research breakthrough occur? At the lab bench or in the coffee lounge? In this way, the urban planners’ question, “How can urban systems and relationships be arranged to support urban community?” can be answered within buildings as well as in cities.

Dörte Kuhlmann: Wien, Österreich

Für den Beitrag verantwortlich: UmBau
AnsprechpartnerIn für diese Seite: Sabina Prudic-Hartl (office@umbau.or.at)