A Discussion About Rhetoric, the "Learning from..." and the Virtues of the Generic:
A Talk with Denise Scott Brown & Robert Venturi

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OO - Can the Neo-Avant-Garde project of the late 1960s and '70s, with its rescuing attempt to turn architecture into a communication science, with its use of linguistic and symbolic systems, be rescued for current architectural practice? Do we need its models or its spirit of experimentation?

RV – To frame the discussion, let me review quickly the content of our written work since 1966. *Complexity and Contradiction* (1) reacted to the purity and minimalism of Modern architecture of the time. I tried to bring back reference to history in architectural theory and used comparative analysis to show parallels between historical and contemporary architecture. *Learning from Las Vegas* (2) documented our discovery of the vernacular commercial landscape and the significance of signage. Denise and I realized, "Oh my God! We have had signage all along; the Modernists were the only architects who threw it out, or thought they did." Here, and in my second book, *Iconography and Electronics* (3), symbolism rather than space was investigated. Placing ourselves in the information age, we recommended employing symbolic allusion rather than abstract expression to communicate and make reference. We pointed toward iconographic media beyond architecture -- electrographics and electronics -- and suggested that architects find new sources of inspiration, based on the world around them, to replace the Nineteenth century, industry-derived sources they had depended on since the start of Modernism. In our latest book, *Architecture as Signs and Systems* (4), we define and discuss these two facets of architecture and urbanism, but we emphasize mannerism and mannerist breaking of the system when necessary to satisfy the requirements of our complex era.

DSB – We continue to make the case for symbolism in this book, but we go on to describe other, urban-derived ways of conceiving architecture, and to show how they help us in design. It's strange to hear our work called Neo-Avant-Garde. To us, it doesn't need rescuing because we've employed it all along, using and developing our theoretical research of the 1950s, '60s and '70s in our practice from then till now. So in our office the old NAG is alive and well. However some architects seem to believe that Bob Venturi and I went down in a shipwreck called "Pomo," during the commercial crassness of the 1980s. Yet 40 years of our work show how NAG has thrived, and we've lived to see a new generation of architects forget their parents' argument with us and look at what we actually do. This is wonderful, and it's why we deeply appreciate your rescue effort. So you've asked an excellent question, and our answer is yes, indeed we need this approach today. We, like you, see ourselves as rescuers. We feel we're saving the spirit and principles of early Modernism. Take Functionalism, for example. Although Neo-modernists say it's not important, its philosophy is, for us, one of the glories of Modern architecture. But it's defined inappropriately for our time. So we've tried to translate it to suit evolving world conditions since the 1960s, particularly the emerging age of information. In the process, we've recommended a new, but really old, function for architecture -- communication (5).

You should now take this project into the future. Hold to its guiding principles but study communication modes beyond the electric and electronic, and try to foresee the new patterns of association that they could engender. They will change everything and nothing, and in ways that are not wholly predictable, but they will underline, as well, the idea of change itself. Flexibility was hardly mentioned by the early Moderns until after World War II, when the task of rebuilding European cities turned 1950s architects toward both history and change. In those cities they found buildings that had survived over centuries. Some had existed in use as housing since the twelfth century (though

certainly their plumbing was different). Others, especially palazzos, had acquired a range of different uses. And today, in most buildings over ten years old, the first program of activities, the client's brief, is not the last. Indeed, the requirements change while we are designing and yet again before construction ends. This suggests we reassess our notions of Functionalism in the light of a theory of change. Those medieval houses put you in awe of the possibilities of functional change over time. How did activities and lifestyles succeed each other, again and again, and what in the house designs enabled them to do so? How does that work today? The invention of the PC and its liberation in the iPod does not mean that all buildings must be rebuilt, but many will be adapted. Learning from history, we should ask, how do buildings accept change? Which building types have multiple functional possibilities, and why? These are, to me, some questions a new generation should ask.

RV - This relates to the idea of the generic building that can accommodate different activities at different times. We use the analogy of a glove and a mitten. The generic building is not designed to cover individual fingers but, like a mitten, to allow wiggle room and take hands of different sizes. Industrial loft buildings have a long tradition of doing this -- that's why our office is in one. And the Italian palazzo was first a residence for a noble family and later a museum, library or embassy. So form can accommodate as well as follow function.

OO - So there is a value in this generic sort of condition?

DSB - Absolutely, the loft is a prototype today for offices and other building types where change must be allowed for. Early Modern architects designed most buildings as gloves. Le Corbusier told students to analyze the workings of a train kitchen. This provides a space for a certain size of fork and another for a second size. Corb saw functionalism in the context of the

industrial revolution, where machines had unique shapes because one was a pump, one a container and another a chimney. But automobile parts were eventually set under a streamlined body, and electronics brought miniaturization and melding that makes the functional expression of separate elements inapplicable.

RV - There are two aspects here, one is the loft building. It figures strongly in the libraries, classrooms and laboratories we design. Laboratories in particular are constantly changing, not only functionally and spatially but in their mechanical systems. The other aspect is the iconography on the surface of buildings, especially the electronic appliqué that we have written about. Sadly, we haven't been able to use this technique much in our work because most of our buildings, being academic, must sit recessively in their context. They shouldn't impose. We wish we had designed that building in New York whose exterior facade is essentially one big billboard covered with changing electronic iconography. But we haven't been employed by clients who need that form of communication. There is an irony that in architecture your followers get to do it before you do (laughs).

OO - But with this use of electronics, are we truly making today architecture for an information age or just referencing and simulating it?

RV – The electronics may incidentally

express their time, but they're there to communicate. The ancient Egyptians covered their buildings with hieroglyphics. The statue-laden fronts of cathedrals of the middle ages were essentially billboards designed to inform and persuade people about Christianity. The mosaics that blanketed the interiors of Byzantine churches certainly made their spaces more wonderful but their primary function was to give information. For a century, we architects talked only of space, now we should focus as well on symbolism. Communication should be one of the functions of architecture. And it should contribute to another of architecture's functions, which is to help enhance community.

MLD - Which do you think are the new symbols and signs of our time? If the role of architectural history is no longer what it used to be, can it still serve as a reference or an allusion?

RV – Yes, but it's important to mention that this can have a negative side. Fascist architecture had strong symbolic references and graphics that were dreadful in content. Much content today is commercial and American. Wherever you are today, someone is selling you Coca-Cola or enticing you into a McDonald's.

DSB – I'd rather they tried to sell me Coke than religion.

RV - Exactly, exactly. That's not so bad, though lots of people are snobbish about it. But decoration can also have a role in accommodating the diversity and multiculturalism of our time. Today, most of the world's urban societies use more or less the same technologies of building, the same structural and mechanical systems, mainly for economic reasons. Therefore the universal aspect of recent global architecture is technical. But another aspect, the expressive, can and should be different. If firmness, commodity and delight are the three elements of architecture, then the delight part, which can vary, should enable architecture to acknowledge that there are many different cultures, not one universal culture, in the world.

OO - So really architectural history should be utilized or studied in terms of its communicational aspects. But aren't we now in the information age, where maybe historical reference isn't that precise? And which is more relevant today, multiculturalism or the many fields that tie to or evolve from the information age?

DSB – These are fascinating questions. Let me answer the last one first. Both multiculturism and IT-engendered social change are important, but they tend today toward opposite poles, multiculturalism toward diversity and IT, I would claim, toward universality. I was amazed in China to see a rural person squatting on his haunches on an urban sidewalk in a pose used universally in rural societies for everything from meeting to toileting. He was speaking on a cell phone. Such technology-induced changes in living activities at building and city scale are the main reason for our suggestion that young architects now take up the reassessment of Functionalism that was started in Europe in the 1950s and continued in our research and practice. But these technologies tend to promote universality. They make activities in the cities of the world more similar, more "American." However, I can foresee a time when the new appliances become internalized to local cultures and are considered no more American than the telephone. So the iPhone will figure as much in a traditional Korean wedding ceremony as in a western one. It probably already does. Today Japanese families may sit on chairs and eat hamburgers for supper when they are home, even if they prefer to dine ceremonially and traditionally when

they go out (and so do we, and we eat sushi). And although the developing sciences of sustainability may help building to respond more than now to local conditions, this will probably be achieved through coopting natural and craft methods and materials into the universal systems. This reply argues that the Vitruvian element delight, more than firmness, more than commodity, will be the conduit for the expression of diversity and locality in world architecture. But, to answer your first question: who said architectural communication had to involve only history? Not us. Let me give you an example. The façade of our extension to the British National Gallery on Trafalgar Square is in Portland stone like that of the existing building, and it uses columns reproduced from the earlier building as part of its vocabulary of communication. But we use them differently. Bob Venturi can describe in detail how they are different -- because, inter alia, their rhythms are those of jazz -- but that's not the issue here. The point is that our use of history was an allusion, intended to tie the new wing into the Trafalgar Square complex. The columns were a formal device to give unity, but more than that, they communicated a continuity between new and old and, even more, between successive building cultures in London, where the meaning of classical architecture and Portland stone would take some pages to dissect. But, being a modern building, our Portland stone is a relatively thin facing. So, in fact, is the whole main façade. Like that of an Italian palazzo, it

looks heavy and decorative but it doesn't go back more than a couple of meters, and it makes no pretence to do so, as you can see when you turn the corner. Our stone front is, in fact, a screen, a decorative billboard, alluding to a culture. Beyond and behind it, winding though it, you will see a modern, steel, glass and brick building. And between the two, at the main entrance, is a place for sheltering from the rain

RV – Behind that billboard façade, the glass window-walls have black frames -- a juxtaposition of Modernist Mies van der Rohe and Neoclassical London.

OO - In this mixing of Mies, the palazzo, and your own extensive processes of experimentation, to what extent have you, over the years, become your own reference? Can you reference yourselves?

DSB - Other people reference us. We see Bob's mother's house on top of high buildings worldwide. But we don't do it ourselves. And we don't like to cannibalize ourselves. We're frustrated when people ask, "Why can't you do what you did in that other building?' or say, "Any of those three buildings would be acceptable, but not this new thing you are showing us." This is because each design evolved from the specifics of its program. To do it now because we did it before would in many cases be to betray the program.

RV - And our buildings have to fit different

contexts. Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright were philosophical enemies but they both believed in design from the inside out. We say you should also design from the outside in, taking account of the needs of context. This gives dynamic tension. Our buildings are different from each other because, as Denise said, they serve different functions, but also because their contexts are different. But this doesn't require a building to be analogous to its context. Depending on circumstance, it can be in contrast – or a mixture of both (6).

DSB - Someone said, recently, "Robert Venturi" (such people leave me out) "has had only one idea in his career, and he built a little house for his mother." I would say we've been lucky in life to have had an idea, a few ideas, and to have built on them a broad and complex structure of thought. Focus on these ideas over the length of our careers has given our work continuity. And yes, in Bob's mother's house, in embryo, are (almost) all the ideas we've worked with since.

RV - That house doesn't represent our whole ideology.

OO - But could it be that because of the complexity of the things that were managed at that house at the same time, could that, by consequence, have sprung a whole bunch of other ideas?

DSB – Certainly, take for example the relation between public and private. That's an idea we've developed since the 1950s, through research and in our urbanism and architecture. And it's in the Vanna Venturi House. You can see it in the plan. The public part has a marble tile floor. And the notion of the street through the building is also there in miniature. It starts in the driveway, passes through the entry porch and hallway, becomes a stair/bleacher in the living room, winds behind the fireplace, and ends in the "nowhere stair" at the top of the house.

RV - In discussing complexity, we must mention how much we love Shanghai. I knew I would love the diversity that derives from its great history, the complexities and contradictions embodied in its more than a century of mingling of world cultures. But when we got there we found so much more than we had expected. And we saw

how once-western sections had merged and melded with amazing Chinese commercial areas where signage dominates.

DSB – The latest is the electronics-covered Pudong. During the day, on the street amidst its skyscrapers, it's a nightmare; but at night, from across the river, it's a fairy land.

RV - It almost makes Times Square look historical (laughs).

MLD - How do you position yourselves with a place when you try to study or understand it? Do you apply to it a former research archetype or do you just let it speak to you?

DSB - We do a "learning from" study. At the outset, while we're fresh, we try to get down our impressions and save them for a time when we're deep in the project and may miss the wood for the trees. So we record what we first notice. Then, in all research but especially in ours, there's the question of how much the project speaks to you directly and how much you are guided by your matrix, your system. You have the reality before you and you have the budget limits of your project. If you don't use some kind of template the data will be more than you can handle. One of my professors used to talk about the whale theory of research. The whale opens its mouth and swims, eating whatever enters. If you use that method you will miss items off your path or over spend. So in the learning-from phase you have to develop a sense of what's going to be important. You need experience to guess where the project is likely to go and what you will need to study.

RV - When you look at context or quality of environment, it's vitally important to consider the vernacular as well as the high culture.

OO - And what are the most relevant destinations to study for current discourse? Are they cities or are they small local shops or chain stores? Are they a mix of both?

RV - In the 1960s, architects did not emphasize the automobile or the American everyday landscape. That's why we went to Los Angeles and Las Vegas and later to Levittown, to see if we could learn something.

DSB – As a practitioner, your study destinations depend on the subject matter of your project and on what specific sites *offer. But for academics the question can* be answered by asking what *should be* interesting to people now? Historians need a certain skill – though it shouldn't be their only skill – in comprehending present issues well enough to lead architects to aspects of history that could be relevant for them today. In this sense, history comes and goes for us. And so does context. We feel it's important for us now to see the Tokyo Ginza and the new urbanism of China, of the Far East in general, but if we're designing a college lab building in New England we might look at Massachusetts industrial lofts. (We might look at them for lessons in flexibility wherever we are.)

RV - Do you know our article on Tokyo?

DSB - It's called "Two Naïfs in Japan."

RV - That's right, but you could call it, Tokyo as vital mess (laughs) (7).

OO - No, I don't know this essay.

DSB - In Shanghai there were fascinating vernacular buildings that derived from global borrowing. "Le long" housing is set in the middle of a dense commercial block and reached via a narrow archway off the main street. Go through, and you find a maze of small alleys, wide enough to take one car; along them are two or three-story single family houses, right there at the center of the commercial activity. Li long have a late 19th century origin and came from the mews streets and cottages of London. It's amazing and moving that a London prototype became part of the Chinese vernacular. When I referred to them in print, a Chinese professor in America wrote saying he'd never found an equivalent social environment anywhere and, having tried many American housing types, he'd not yet discovered one where he could live as happily as in the li long.

OO - Inspired greatly by your work with the ordinary and the every-day, we embarked on a study of the mass migrations of Puerto Ricans to Orlando, Florida. This exodus of sorts has been a recurring condition of the Puerto Rican population. Historically, it has included cities like New York and Chicago, yet quite differently, today's migration has been fueled by desire and

apparent cultural continuity. One of our main hypotheses was that we were going to Orlando to understand our local condition, and specifically how we imagine the way we *urbanize, migration becoming a cultural* extension of our will to escape and start over. Unlike the cities mentioned earlier, the territory where we found ourselves contained no distinct population sectors that could be easily pinpointed, owing in part to an ever expanding privatized territory. What research tools, new or old, are needed to understand such socially complex yet diluted cityscapes?

DSB - Are you looking at cityscapes in Puerto Rico that have been brought about by people whose mental images of the ideal home rely on migration and borrowing of elements from elsewhere?

OO - Of course, it's a simultaneous condition. People who migrate are looking for Puerto Rico wherever they go, but in addition such people try to export their new context back to Puerto Rico. Added to that, people who are still on the island take into account family or friends who migrated and try to import that migrant context into Puerto Rico, in a sort of endless cycle of desire.

DSB - All over the world that's called "Americanization" and it's scorned. In France they see borrowing from American language as ruining the purity of French. In England they don't say "dessert" they say "pudding" because "dessert" is American, and they resent Starbucks and MacDonald's restaurants as American cultural hegemony. Are Puerto Rican immigrants and the locals who learn from them surrendering to cultural hegemony?

OO - I think all these types of borrowing share the same roots. It's a borrowing and interchange similar to that which induces rhetoric in your French and English examples, but it goes into the exportation of urban conditions or a desire for a particular urban condition.

DSB – It happens in Japan too. When I was first there, I felt I could relax because there was no way I could understand the language. In Europe I can make a brave effort to understand German or Spanish but in Japan, forget it. Then, as I grew used to the country, I began to spot borrowings -- from Times Square for the Ginza, but

also technical terms. Eventually I could recognize some English words with a Japanese flavor and, in a deep substratum, German words from an earlier domination. To me this can be a sign of cultural vitality.

OO - Going back to the question of the research tools necessary for these territories: in our case, we found ourselves scratching the surface of such diverse fields as ethnography, anthropology and, less so, architecture. Can a truly autonomous project of architecture ever be assembled, or do we need to immerse ourselves into interdisciplinary fields, as it is currently advocated in architecture?

DSB - In short, yes and no. But again this is a question with a long answer. Architects who feel their work should be autonomous and should concern only form-making have put themselves in a profession where, if you don't meet the functional needs of your client, you will be fired. We are mandated to make buildings do things for the people who pay for them and live in them. Louis Kahn used to say that a sculptor can sculpt a car with square wheels to make a statement about something, but an engineer has to design one with wheels that will roll. And we architects cannot be autonomous from such requirements. But as you fulfill them many questions arise. Some architects approach the questions with a narrow palette of thought and others with a broad one. When the thought is too narrow you can't fulfill the requirements and you lose the job. If the palette is very broad you face questions on how to make the thought relevant. I have been involved in interdisciplinary education since the 1960s. I saw this project fail because architects didn't know how to do it. They bored their students by not convincing them of the relevance of the connections they were trying to make, or by making wrong or irrelevant connections or ones that were too literal. Or by approaching the borrowed discipline, say physics, as if they were physicists rather than architects. My interdisciplinary areas are primarily (but not only) urban sociology and urban and regional economics. These have been fruitful for me as an architect, in design. They've helped to add urban and contextual dimensions to the methods we use for going from program to form. And they've taught us to take functionalism outside the building and urbanism into

it (8). But I'm careful to warn architects against using economic and social material as a social scientist would. And the social scientists can't help us translate it either. That's a job we have to do. We must know our own topic, architecture, and know how to ask questions that will enable us to learn from other fields. If we can't do that, the interdisciplinary project becomes irrelevant or obstructive for architecture. A few further thoughts on your Puerto Rican study: it sounds a bit like our "Learning from Levittown" project, whose context was also, for the most part, undefined suburbia. The research topics for that study are published in *On Houses and Housing* (9). And you might consider widening your span to encompass Hispanic residential

and working districts in Los Angeles, where Catholic mass is said in 48 different languages.

OO - When we recently talked you mentioned you were utilizing and researching a term coined by Peter and Alison Smithson, "socioplastics." Does this have to do with what you are talking about now and could you tell us a little bit about this term and its usefulness?

DSB – The Smithson called it "active socioplastics." They thought about it after World War II, when new towns were being built in England to house bombed populations, and an unintended result was the hardship suffered by low-income
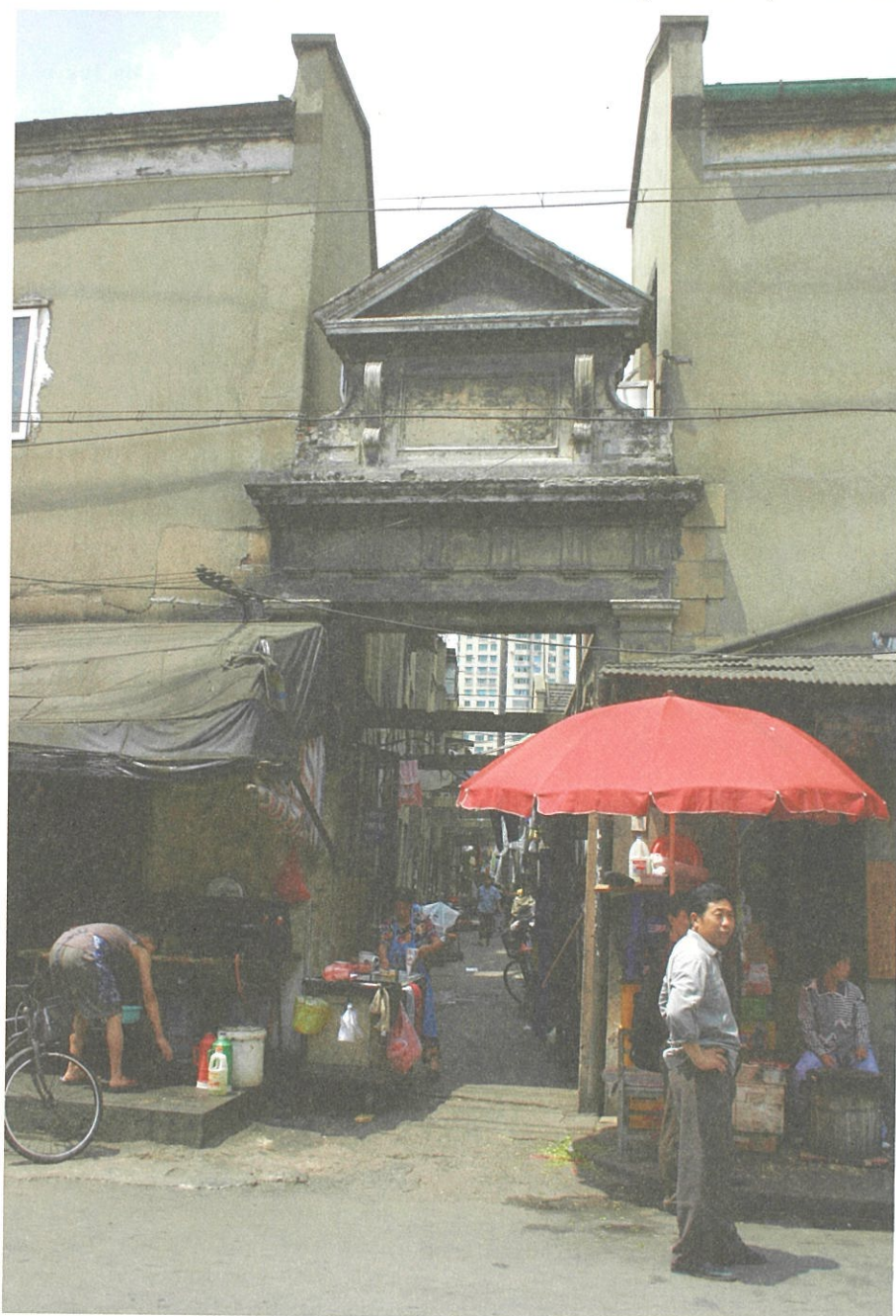
people from London's East End. They had depended on the social support of neighborhood networks around them -- on "street life" -- which they lost when they were moved into the middle class new towns. This fact caused English architects of the early 1950s to try to understand and design for the life of the street. To do this, the Smithsons attempted to collaborate with urban sociologists. But something happened. I don't know what; I would imagine there was inability to communicate and arrogance on both sides. And when built, the streets in the sky did not work. Peter Smithson wrote that the sociologists would have to extend their discipline before he could learn from them, but I felt that would never happen; that the bridge would have to be formed by the architects.

MLD - How did you position yourselves with your Bank of Celebration project where you already had an existing, historically charged and simulated condition in a New Urbanist community scenario? Was there room for trial and experimentation?

DSB - New Urbanism has its own historical view.

RV - We were not happy with the New Urbanist ideas. There was some historical reference in our design but I don't consider it one of our more significant buildings.

DSB - Our design refers more to everyday commercial architecture than to history. I feel our building is true to itself and to its archetype -- the small town commercial bank. Think of a town that's part of a toy train set. What would the school house in that town be like? That's the archetype. While designing a school, we wouldn't necessarily imitate the archetype but we would have it in mind, as a datum.

RV - We also designed a fire station in Orlando. It's one of the few buildings we've done in Florida. Do you remember it?

OO - Yes we do.

RV - Because it's near Disney World, our approach was to refer symbolically to a child's image of a fire station. We did that, too, in an exaggerated way for the Children's Museum in Houston, Texas. The front made decorative reference to the classical façade of the grown up museum nearby,

and at the side were caryatids -- caryakids. I like it. It's teeming with symbolism.

OO – What do you think are the main differences between Neo-modernist reference to Modern architecture and the multiple references you have talked here about?

RV – Our references connect with the particular needs of the building and its context, broadly defined. Therefore they are eclectic and involve many symbols. And they are clearly reference not reproduction, we're not trying to fool anyone. And our symbolism is not sculptural, we're not making the whole building a dynamic sculptural statement, we're making a loft, a loft building with signage on it. We're utterly bored with the current Neo-modernism.

OO - Because they are probably just referencing the aesthetics of a modernist building?

DSB - Neo-modernism is a Postmodern style like the other postmodernisms, except that it makes historical reference to early Modernism not the Renaissance. When we refer we don't try to take anyone in, but we do comment and our comment may be wry.

RV - Our historical allusions aren't literal. They're flat not three-dimensional, representations not replications.

OO - How does your thesis, developed in Architecture as Signs and Systems, with its reassessment of mannerism apply to city theory and research?

DSB – There's a chapter in the book on mannerism in urbanism (10). Mannerism was once seen as neurosis or the bored dallying of dilettante architects, but we define it for cities today as the bending and breaking of rules, when complex overlapping systems prevent all rules from being met at once because many are in conflict. You don't break them because you're bored, you bend them so they can meld with others, so all can hang together. But in some parts of the city the rules clash so much that nothing really works – at least, as we architects might consider working. Sometimes these are the most exciting places.

RV - That's sort of the essence of Tokyo.

DSB - Yes. They may be found where urban infrastructure and building systems collide and the slivers of space that lie between can't be used for much. I call these places the playgrounds of the gods. They're Mount Olympus on a Saturday night. They're formally exciting and aesthetically challenging and Mannerists like Rem Koolhaas love to swing over them on a flying trapeze. His IIT student center adapts just that kind of space. He even creatively uses the noise of the trains as they pass over the building. These collisions and Rem's response to them, our research on rule-breaking American and world cities, and the ideas it generated in our work, all give evidence of the continuing viability of the frisky NAG. Thank you for continuing the project.

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